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A Study of Carl Sandburg's Poetry : His Early Impressionism and Later Folklorism

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A STUDY OF CARL SANDBURG'S POETRY: HIS EARLY IMPRESSIONISM AND LATER FOLKLORISM

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(An Abstract)

In the earlier twentieth century the tumult of industrial America was vividly expressed through Sandburg's imagistic technique and his use of American slang. But he was not successful enough in bringing his poetic imagery into focus amid the chaos of newly developing America. Almost all his early poems were colored by a pessimistic tone, and his technique showed its greatest effect in short, melancholy lyrics. His early poetic manner is based on a sensuous response to the mechanism of modern society, a response which is defined as impressionism in this thesis.

But later, in an attempt to overcome his pessimism, Sandburg searched for a new image of the American people and their native ground in the folk tradition. In spite of this search--folklorism--his poetic focus became even more vague amid the heterogeneous American folk materials. All he could find was dim shadows or silhouettes of the people who built a new

country on the prairie through their inexpressible hardships. Moreover, the skeptical tone never disappeared from his poetry, even in his affirmative attempt in The People, Yes. In this sense, his early impressionism and later folklorism are firmly connected with each other. His main weakness lies in his insistence upon a so-called Americanism separated from the long historical tradition of European civilization.

Despite this unsatisfactory result, however, his efforts to keep poetry close to the American scene, land, and people must be evaluated highly in sharp contrast with the aesthetic poets who turned away from the people in order to devote themselves to the technical refinement of their poetry. Although nowadays America has to a great extent passed out of the turmoil in which Sandburg had nourished his poetic faculty, one cannot reject him as a poet of the past. His efforts are suggestive at least of one phase of American civilization, which had been founded on the heterogeneous elements of European tradition, and eventually of the homogeneity which America has been attempting to achieve.

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PREFACE

America has seen an unprecedented poetic renaissance since the earlier years of the twentieth century. Of all the many modern American poets, Carl Sandburg occupies a unique position as a poet of the American scene and idiom. His career as a poet is closely related to the past half-century in the history of America. His poetry is, as it were, the footprints of the people who have experienced these stormy days of industrialization, immigration, two world wars, the boom years, and the great depression. History never stops its steps; therefore, one must always look back over the past and examine the present in order to have some prospect of the future.

It can be said, in this sense, that now is the time to revaluate the Chicago poet by examining his idea and image of America from today's point of view. Is Sandburg's America yesterday's America? What does it foretell about tomorrow's America? The research done in this thesis attempts to answer, at least partly, these questions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A Bibliographical Outlook and Hypothesis. Carl Sandburg has been often hailed, especially in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, as one of the greatest American poets. But surprisingly enough, there are only four books which wholly treat Sandburg, two of which are pamphlets which have long been out of print, and the other two are biographical studies rather than critical research of his poetry itself.[1] By comparison, the intensive books on Robert Frost's poetry number about fifteen. This fact shows that Sandburg the poet has rarely been dealt with in full scale by serious critics and scholars in spite of the fiery reactions of various periodicals. But a close examination of the bibliographical materials, which consist mainly of the articles, book reviews, and books which partly discuss him, presents a number of very significant problems concerning one aspect of modern American poetry as a whole, as well as his poetry in particular.

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[1] Harry Hansen, Carl Sandburg: The Man and His Poetry, "A Little Blue Book," (Girard, Kansas, 1925); Hughes Mears, Carl Sandburg, in the "Pamphlet Poets" series, (New York, 1926); Karl William Detzer, Carl Sandburg: A Study in Personality and Background (New York, 1941); Harry Golden, Carl Sandburg (New York, 1961).

Sandburg the poet appeared in the American poetic scene through Poetry: A Magazine of Verse with Harriet Monroe's warm appluase. The founder of this historic journal, who praised him by saying, "He has the unassailable and immovable earthbound strength of a great granite rock . . . ," did not change her friendly attitude toward him all her life. In Sandburg's poetry she found the best expression of the new poetic movement.[2] Louis Untermeyer, Amy Lowell, and Carl Van Doren also joined her in hailing Sandburg as a champion of the new voices of "American singing"; particularly Untermeyer said that Sandburg was a follower of Whitman and, quoting Synge's words, that his poetry was a "strong timber" with deep roots among "the clay and worms."[3]

In the earlier twentieth century, of course, Sandburg irritated conventional critics and was called a "gross, simple-minded, sentimental, sensual, mystical mobocrat" by one of them.[4] They focused their criticism on his use of slang and socialistic ideas. And later,

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[2]Harriet Monroe, "Chicago Granite," Poetry, VIII (March 1916), 90-93.

[3]Louis Untermeyer, "Strong Timber," The Dial, LXV (October 1918), 263-64.

[4]William A. Bradley, "Four American Poets," The Dial, LXI (December 1916), 528-30.

after the drastic change of the American poetic horizon, the aesthetic experimentalists took the place of the conventional critics in denouncing or ignoring Sandburg. Conrad Aiken expressed a typical opinion shared by them, saying that Sandburg was not "a realistic poet," but "a poetic realist."[5] Ezra Pound, though he had long been Sandburg's close friend, in writing to a professor at the University of Pennsylvania suggesting a fellowship should be given to Sandburg, said: "Sandburg is a lumberjack who has taught himself all that he knows. He is on the way toward simplicity. His energy may for all one knows waste itself at an imperfect imperfectible argot."[6]

With the coming of the thirties, the critical reactions to Sandburg's poetry were roughly divided into two groups; for one group he was an authentic descendant of Whitman and a champion of the poets of Americanism, while for another, chiefly the New Critics, he was merely one of the primitive poets of local color, who displayed only "a crust of modern American materials

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[5]Conrad Aiken, Scepticism: Notes on Contemporary Poetry (New York, 1919), pp. 143-8.

[6]Quoted from Golden's Carl Sandburg, op. cit., pp. 166-7.

thrown over statements which are as vague, and sometimes as sentimental, as those of Whitman."[7] And the postwar years beginning in 1945 caused a drastic eclipse of Sandburg's fame in direct ratio to the rise of Eliot's and Frost's.

A detailed study of the critical works on Sandburg's poetry shows that there are at least two important problems left to be discussed. First, the remarkable contrast between the violently explosive poems and short, tender lyrics in Chicago Poems, though pointed out by some critics, has hardly been given full consideration. The relationship between these two early aspects of his poetic manner would be an important clue for understanding his later poetry, which is marked by folklorism. And second, although a gradual but obvious change of his poetic manner---from impressionism to folklorism---appeared in his poetry as early as the twenties, most critics have paid no particular attention to it. It is not impossible that these two characteristics are related and that an exploration of them will furnish a key to understanding Sandburg's poetry.

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[7]Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill, 1939), pp. 69-109.

The Purpose of This Thesis. The main purpose of this thesis is to illuminate the difference between Sandburg's earlier and later poetry which has rarely been discussed before and to examine the relationship between the two strands intertwined in his work. If one regards him as a poet of Americanism and ignores his earlier Imagist side, as Cleanth Brooks has done, one's evaluation will not be free from oversimplication. And, at the same time, an overestimation of the Imagist side cannot explain why and how he turned later to the American folk tradition. A study of the two main aspects of Sandburg's poetry is considered to constitute the contribution of this thesis.

The Definition of the Terms Used. In order to indicate the above-mentioned two trends of Sandburg's poetry, the word "impressionism" has been used for his earlier Imagist side and "folklorism" for his later search for folk tradition. Although these two words taken together do not fully describe all the aspects of his poetic manner, they are considered to be appropriate to emphasize the main aspect of his early and later days. And it must be pointed out here that these words are not completely antithetical.

The Procedure and Scope of the Study. First, the research in this thesis has been concentrated on a critical interpretation of Sandburg's poetry itself; secondly, his own writings on poetry and other topics and his biographical data have been also used to show the validity of the critical interpretation. Moreover, the critics' arguments on his poetry have been quoted and discussed to dilate and deepen the reasoning done here. But little extensive effort has been made here to compare Sandburg with other American poets to whom he might be related; consequently, whatever may be demonstrated to be true of him is not necessarily true, although it may be, of other poets to whom he bears similarities or affinities.

CHAPTER II

SANDBURG'S EARLY IMPRESSIONISM

A. The Two Aspects of Chicago Poems

"Chicago," the title poem of Chicago Poems, attracts the reader by its rough colloquialism, lack of conventional meter and rhyme, and realistic description of details. Its figures of speech evidence its traits:

"fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action"

"cunning as a savage pitted against the wilderness"

"laughing as a young man laughs"

"laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle"

"dust all over his mouth, laughing wit white teeth"

"a tall bold slugger"

"the marks of wanton hunger"

"flinging magnetic curses"

"city with lifted head singing"[1]

These are fresh and magnetically strong in color and tone, as if they were oil paints flung roughly against

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[1]Carl Sandburg, Complete Poems (New York, 1950), "Chicago," pp. 3-4.

a canvas. The harsh, brutal realism is Sandburg's sensitive response to the chaotic and energetic city of Chicago.

Following are similarly brutal poems from the first collection: "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter," "Dynamiter," "Who Am I?," "Skyscraper," "Graceland," "The Right to Grief," "I Am the People, the Mob," and "Government." These poems are marked by eloquent protest against social evils and injustices. And throughout the poems there appear Sandburg's sensuous response to the violent materials of modern industrial society. But his response lacks a deep insight into, and therefore an analysis of, whatever forces dominate the materials. Men in his poetry seem to be small particles thronging and struggling blindly under the invisible superhuman force. When "[b]y day the skyscraper looms in the smoke and sun and has a soul," and when "the wind whistles a wild song without words," men and women, boys and girls are poured in and out all day from the huge building, and they "give the building a soul of dreams and thoughts and memories."

The people are regarded as the mob which confronts the superhuman force of the mechanism of society with its collective physical power. The poet shouts:

> I am the people--the mob--the crowd--the mass . . .
> I am . . . the maker of the world's food and clothes.

I am the audience that witnesses history . . .[2]

The basic tone of this poem is the poet's desire to identify himself with the collective force of the mass. Man as an individual is feeble, like a small particle amid the vast universe, but when he joins with others as a member of the mass, he can believe that he is a maker of history.

When Sandburg severely denounces Billy Sunday in "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter," and confesses his skepticism with regard to religious belief in "Who Am I?," the reader is attracted only by the violent diction:

> You came along . . . tearing your shirt . . .
> yelling about Jesus.
> Where do you get that stuff?
> What do you know about Jesus?[3]

> I have been to hell and back many times.
> I know all about heaven, for I have talked
> with God.
> I dabble in the blood and guts of the ter-
> rible . . .
> My name is Truth and I am the most elusive
> captive in the universe.[4]

Thus he was called a "simple-minded, sentimental, . . . mystic mobocrat" by William A. Bradley, contributing editor of The Dial, which had been a conservative journal until 1918.[5]

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[2] Ibid., "I Am the People, the Mob," p. 71.

[3] Ibid., "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter," pp. 29-30.

[4] Ibid., "Who Am I?," p. 48.

[5] William A. Bradley, "Four American Poets," The Dial, LXI (December 1916), pp. 528-30.

On the other hand, however, some critics praised Sandburg's poetry as the answer to Whitman's call that American poetry should be "the barbaric yawp." The enthusiastic revolt against the Genteel Tradition and the discovery of Midwestern energy in the earlier twentieth century marked an epoch in the history of American literature. In this sense, some critics naturally believe that Sandburg's poetry played a significant role in breaking through from the past as a symbol of the young voice of America.

But if one judges Sandburg only by the above-quoted poems, it is a great mistake. According to a rough classification of Chicago Poems, out of the 146 poems, there are only about ten pieces which have the violent quality mentioned above. In most of the other poems, Sandburg sometimes shows his tender sense of beauty and delicacy by a short lyric, and at other times indulges a troubled melancholy.

To these other poems, tender and mellow as a water-color painting, we have given the name "impressionism." Following is an example of this type at its best:

The shadows of the ships
Rock on the crest
In the low blue lustre
Of the tardy and the soft inrolling tide.

A long brown bar at the dip of the sky
Puts an arm of sand in the span of salt.

The lucid and endless wrinkles
Draw in, lapse and withdraw.
Wavelets crumble and white spent bubbles
Wash on the floor of the beach.

Rocking on the crest
In the low blue lustre
Are the shadows of the ships.[6]

Here is Sandburg's subtle sensitivity and delicacy of emotion. It is difficult to conceive that two poems could be so different and still have the same author as the one above and "Chicago." It is as if there were two poets in Sandburg himself. This point was also referred to by Bradley in The Dial:

> The first Mr. Sandburg is merely a clever reporter, with a bias for social criticism. The second, within his limits, is a true artist, whose method of concentration, of intense, objective realization, ranges him with those who call themselves "Imagists."[7]

And several years later, Sherwood Anderson, through his keen insight into the poet's personality, pointed out "the naïve, hesitant, sensitive" Sandburg "buried deep within the He man."[8] Bradley's emphasis is rather upon the brutal Sandburg, while Anderson thinks that the impressionistic side of Sandburg is the real essence of his poetic personality. Which is the real Sandburg? How are the two Sandburgs connected with each other?

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[6]Sandburg, op. cit., "Sketch," p. 4.

[7]Bradley, op. cit., 529.

[8]Sherwood Anderson, "Carl Sandburg," The Bookman, LIV (December 1921), 360-61.

In order to understand his poetry by means of this important clue, a much more detailed analysis must be made. The relationship between these two aspects of Chicago Poems would reveal how his early impressionism is connected with his later folklorism.

B. Sandburg's Use of Imagery in Chicago Poems

First, the images used often in his poems must be analyzed concretely to illuminate his poetic world. Especially indicated in Sandburg's poems is his use of the images of fog, mist, dusk, moonlight, ashes, cinder, fire, flame, bones, dust, and rust. An analysis of these images will show his skepticism, his attitude toward death, his interest in inorganic materials, and his pessimism.

Fog and Mist. Fog and mist are the symbols of Sandburg's agnostic or skeptical attitude toward man and nature.

> Desolate and lone
> All night long on the lake
> Where fog trails and mist creeps,
> The whistle of a boat
> Calls and cries unendingly,
> Like some lost child
> In tears and trouble
> Hunting the harbor's breast
> And the harbor's eyes.[9]

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[9]Sandburg, op. cit., "Lost," p. 5.

Fog creeps into the poet's desolate and lone mind and evokes his cries for something lost. "Lost" is not a mere description of nature, but a picture of his own mind. And the auditory image of the whistle from the boat "hunting the harbor's heart" and "the harbor's eyes," is effectively combined with the image of the fog. The sound effect is also noticeable in this poem. The stop consonants--t, k, s, z, d, and g, combined with low vowels, l sounds, and sibilants, out of which the consonances of t, k, and l sounds are remarkable, create an effective contrast between the stealthy movement of the fog and the keen bitterness of the poet's mind. Thus the image of the whistle as the poet's inner voice is reinforced by the superb combinations of sounds. Sandburg's poetry often has a moody suggestion that he desires something lost. He just stops and wonders, without bothering to analyze his mood.

On a foggy day, the sea and the waves bring back a dream of a lost thing, or a person that is gone. Probably it is a reflection of one's own youth which never comes back again. An image of a blue-and-steel-eyed boy who went to sea long, long ago occurs out of the foggy sea:

> All day long in fog and wind,
> The waves have flung their beating crests
> Against the palisades of adamant.[10]

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[10] Ibid., "All Day Long," p. 66.

Ships going out of the harbor are also the object of the poet's wondering. Black ships move "like mastodons / Arising from letharic sleep" of the harbor, into the "low-reverberating calls" of the sea, and the "wide, far-lifting wilderness" of the sea,

> Plunging,
> Doggedly onward plunging,
> Into salt and mist and foam and sun.[11]

Herein also can be found Sandburg's sense of longing and wonder; the call of the sea touches and moves the poet's soul, but he does not know what may await him over the sea: perhaps "salt and mist and foam and sun."

For Sandburg poetry is "the last answer" written on the mist, and besides, the answers only "go back to dust and mist." He loves dust and mist, not simply because the pearl-and-gray-colored mist changes drab and dull things "into points of mystery quivering with color," but also because

> The whole world was mist once long ago and some day it will all go back to mist.[12]

Sandburg's cosmology in "The Mist" reflects his agnostic thought. "I am the mist, the impalpable mist," says he.

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[11] Ibid., "All Day Long," p. 66.

[12] Ibid., "Lost Answers," p. 57.

"My arms are long, / Long as the reach of time and space."[13]

Sometimes fog creeps over the harbor and city like a cat crouching "on silent haunches," and at other times it wraps warmly the heart shivering with sins. A lonely figure of the poet who walks "in the changing scarf of mist" with the collar of his coat turned up, occurs to the reader when he talks:

> Open the door now.
> Go roll up the collar of your coat
> To walk in the changing scarf of mist . . .
> Yes, tell your sins
> And know how careless a pearl fog is
> Of the laws you have broken.[14]

Dusk. The imagery of dusk and twilight is closely related to that of fog and mist. "The Road and the End" implies the "shapes of hunger" wandering and "the fugitives of pain" going by, which appear out of dusk.[15] For Sandburg the dusk is also the time for musing and dreaming. With day's end, the poet goes back. And "the old remembered pictures" come back to him--the pictures of "lost days when the day's loss / Wrote in tears the heart's

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[13] Ibid., "The Mist," p. 75.

[14] Ibid., "Pearl Fog," p. 54.

[15] Ibid., "The Road and the End," p. 42.

loss." And for the poet of violent speech, the dusk is the time for quiet rest:

> Tears and loss and broken dreams
> May find your heart at dusk.[16]

"On the Breakwater" is a fresh and vivid oil painting. In the blue dusk of summer a boy and a girl are sitting on the breakwater. They are face to face but talk "without words" and sing "rhythms in silence with each other," for the dusk is filled with silent words and rhythms:

> A funnel of white ranges the blue dusk from
> an outgoing boat.
> Playing its searchlight, puzzled, abrupt,
> over a streak of green.
> And the two on the breakwater keep their
> silence, she on his knees.[17]

The dusk is also the source of Sandburg's agnostic prayer. His wistfullness mixed with a sense of loneliness cries for expression in "At a Window":

> Give me hunger,
> O you gods that sit and give
> The world its orders.
> Give me hunger, pain and want,
> Shut me out with shame and failure
> From your doors of gold and fame,
> Give me your shabbiest, weariest hunger! . . .

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[16] Ibid., "Dreams in the Dusk," p. 65.

[17] Ibid., "On the Breakwater," p. 53.

In the dusk of day-shapes
Blurring the sunset,
One little wandering, western star
Thrust out from the changing shores of shadow.
Let me go to the window,
Watch there the day-shapes of dusk
And wait and know the coming
Of a little love.[18]

When "the dusk of day-shapes" closes a day, the poet watches a little wandering star and speaks quietly to the gods, "Give me your shabbiest, weariest hunger!" But the image of wistfulness is not embodied concretely enough; in his chaotic mind something unknown is merely whirling around, seeking expression. When Sandburg deals with abstract ideas, his poem reveals his lack of compression. Although his subtle sensibility is shown brilliantly in some short lyrics, his sensuous use of imagery has little aptitude for expression of abstract ideas. In other words, his poetic representation is, in many cases, a mere picture colored richly by words directly appealing to sense, and his images are rarely enhanced to the level of symbol.

Moonlight. Out of a few good poems which reveal Sandburg's superb visual perception, "Nocturne in a Deserted Brickyard" is as excellent in its evocation of imagery as "Fog" and "Lost." The moonlight making delicate "[f]luxions of yellow and dusk on the waters" "under the curving

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[18] Ibid., "At a Window," p. 49.

willows" is exquisitely embodied into an image of "a wide dreaming pansy." The reader is thrilled rather at the feeling of its coolness--a thermal image coming close to his skin.[19]

In "Whitelight," the moonlight also evokes the poet's dreaming and musing:

> Your whitelight flashes the frost tonight
> Moon of the purple and silent west.
> Remember me one of your lovers of dreams.[20]

For Sandburg the soft silver light of the harvest moon implies a whisper of death--"the gray mocker," and "the flagrant crimson" of the summer roses is love with little hands, which

> Comes and touches you
> With a thousand memories,
> And asks you
> Beautiful, unanswerable questions.[21]

By quick response to nature, Sandburg perceives her "[b]eautiful, unanswerable questions" and wonders and wonders.

And at one time the poet's imagination flies softly far, far away. In the back yard under the silver

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[19] Ibid., "Nocturne in a Deserted Brickyard," p. 55.

[20] Ibid., "Whitelight," p. 34.

[21] Ibid., "Under the Harvest Moon," p. 49.

rain, he sits "drinking white thoughts" which the moon of summer "rain down." An Italian boy is playing the accordion; a Polish boy and his girl are throwing the moon kisses; an old man is dreaming:

> Shine on, O moon,
> Stake out more and more silver changes.[22]

Sandburg's attitude toward death is often reflected by his image of the cool moonlight, as shown in "Under the Harvest Moon." The poet sees a picture of the dead in the cold stretch of the moonlit sand dunes:

> What do we see here in the sand dunes of the
> white moon with our thoughts, Bill,
> Alone with our dreams, Bill . . .
> The dead more than all these grains of sand
> one by one piled here in the moon . . .[23]

Ashes, Cinder, Fire, Flame, Bones. As mentioned before, Sandburg's poetic world is immensely rich in color. But do his colors have human warmth? Why is it that the more fresh and vivid his representation is in color, the further away it is from human feelings? In his poetry one can feel something impersonal and cold, like an inorganic substance. His direct response to color is, in other words, an indication of his fascination with things without life--ash, cinder, fire, flame, and bones.

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[22]Ibid., "Back Yard," p. 53.

[23]Ibid., "Dunes," p. 27.

> Crimson is the slow smolder of the cigar end I hold,
> Gray is the ash that stiffens and covers all silent fire.[24]

Everyone dies and becomes ashes. A great man whom the poet has known now lies in his coffin. He is ash--an extinguished flame. Sandburg only sits and smokes and watches his thoughts come and go. Is not there a drab, gray world like a faded old photograph behind his vivid contrast of color? One finds that the colorfulness of his touch is only on the surface. And he wonders here, too. The essence of his impressionism appears clearly when he says: "I sit here in cumbering shadows / and smoke and watch my thoughts come and go."

The poem "Bath" reveals Sandburg's gray world buried under the colorfulness more obviously than any other poems. The whole world is "a grinning skull and cross bones." "Everything is / a fake. Dust to dust and ashes to ashes and then an / old darkness and a useless silence." He listened to the concert of the fiddle, but there was no change:

> Only there was a singing fire and a climb of roses everlastingly over the world he looked on.[25]

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[24] Ibid., "Crimson," p. 34.

[25] Ibid., "Bath," p. 26.

The colorful words "a singing fire" and "a climb of roses" are merely effective in emphasizing the drabness of ash and dust rather than zest for life. For Sandburg fire is the shadow of death rather than a symbol of burning life and vitality.

The image of bones under the sea is Sandburg's visualized longing for inorganic, impersonal substance. When he says in "Bones,"

> Sling me under the sea
> Pack me down in the salt and wet. . . .
> And I shall be song of thunder, crash old sea,
> Down on the floors of salt and wet. . . .[26]

the image of bones under the sea is illustrated in contrast with those of colorful fish in the sea--"long, green-eyed scavengers," and "purple fish." Sandburg's color, when it is the most brilliant, emits the cool light like the eyes of fish which have just now stopped mov'ng on the grass.

Dust. Sandburg often draws a sketch of the streets of Chicago, where "dust of feet" and "dust of the wheels" are raised all day / as if they were a symbol of a modern city. In "Clark Street Bridge," daytime is expressed in terms of dust, and night through mist and stars:

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[26] Ibid., "Bones," p. 58.

> Stars and mist again
> No more feet or wheels,
> No more dust and wagons. . . .[27]

The night of the big city is filled with man's dreams, desires and wistfulness. Out of the quietude, various voices are heard: "Voices of broken heart, / . . . voices singing, singing, / . . . Silver voices, singing." Day and night are symbolically expressed by a sharp contrast of dust, and stars and mist.

"They Will Say" gives the reader a picture of workers in the slum, who put their children between the walls of the dirty houses away from the sun, the dew, and the glimmering grass,

> To work, broken and smothered, for bread and wages
> To eat dust in their throats and die empty hearted. . . .[28]

The image of dust in this poem is vivid enough tc express the sufferings of daylaborers when he says that they "eat dust in their throats . . ."

Dust is also a symbol of death. Undertakers and gravediggers "handle dust going to a long country." Even a son of a millionaire, a "merchant prince," is reduced to dust, surrounded by

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[27] Ibid., "Clark Street Bridge," p. 7.

[28] Ibid., "They Will Say," p. 5.

roses, lilacs, hydrangeas, tulips,
For perfume and color, sweetness of remembrance
Around his last long home.[29]

No image is better than that of dust to symbolize emptiness of heart. Before death, life is just "Yellow dust on a humble / bee's wing." The memories of life are only crumbling sand, which shines red "in the changing / sunset embers." Here dust is symbolic of the tedium of life.

Yellow dust on a humble
bee's wing,
Grey lights in a woman's
asking eyes,
Red ruins in the changing
sunset embers:
I take you and pile high
the memories.
Death will break her claws
on some I keep.[30]

Rust. Under the immovable reality of society, Sandburg seems to take superhuman force into his body and shout against the mechanism of society. At such a time, his poetry often assumes "mystic" emotion. Sandburg, wishing to be the undertow washing and battering the pillars of the society, flings eloquent protest:

I am a sleepless
Slow faring eater,
Maker of rust and rot

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[29] Ibid., "Graceland," p. 11.

[30] Ibid., "Troths," p. 35.

In your bastioned fastenings,
Caissons deep. . . .[31]

The undertow is law and strength older than human society. This image of the undercurrent flowing in a different direction under the surface of the water, visualizes his severe protest against social injustice effectively. At the same time, however, herein lies the limit of Sandburg's naturalistic way of thinking; the function of his poetic picture remains within the boundary of empathy.

His devotion to the images of dust, ash, and rust indicates his agnostic pessimism. Such a fascination with inorganic things, it can be said, is the most physical response to the cold, impersonal mechanism of modern society. Therefore, Sandburg's poetic manner lacks the intensity of profound ideas, although it is effective to some extent in evoking moods.

C. Sandburg's Treatment of Man and Nature in Chicago Poems

We have seen in the last section that Sandburg's characteristic images--as it were, the expression of his impressionism--show a sensuous response to inorganic substances and that these images show not only a cold and

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[31] Ibid., "Under," p. 47.

impersonal feeling but also a dubious skepticism, a puzzled uncertainty, and a helpless bewilderment. This conclusion will be supported if we make an examination of his treatment of man and nature.

Such an examination is important to our exploration of his turning from impressionism to folklorism because folklore is a product of a people, of a human society; and a study of Sandburg's view of man will enable us to identify the early interests and tendencies which later developed into what we have called folklorism. Out of fifty-five poems of "Chicago Poems," the first section of Chicago Poems, about thirty pieces are portraits of workers and low-class people--a shovel man, muckers, a fish crier, a farmer, a dynamiter, a nigger, an ice-handler, a cripple, passers-by, working girls, undertakers, hearse drivers, grave diggers, a pig-sticker, a policeman, and so forth.

A good number of faces, empty of dreams, hunger-stricken, and in search of happiness, appear as if the reader were in an exhibition of photographs; for instance, "A Family of Man":

> I am the nigger
> Singer of songs,
> Dancer. . . .[32]

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[32] Ibid., "Nigger," p. 23.

This poem, "Nigger," is a typical example which reveals Sandburg's technique, especially in its tone, its sharp response to color, and its vivid diction.

Contrast and Comparison.	"softer than fluff of cotton"
	"harder than dark earth"
	"hands like hams"
	"crazy as the sun and dew and . . ."
Color.	"red love of the blood of woman"
	"white love of the tumbling"
	"pickaninnies"
Metaphor.	"breaking crash of laughter"
	"lazy love of the banjo thrum"

The poem is a brilliantly sparkling picture, and its tone is that of eloquent speech. In its "breaking rhythm," everyone must recognize Sandburg's love and idolatry of the primitive strength of a negro who is "heaving life of the jungle" and "smiling the slumber dreams of the old jungle." Although the poem is motivated by his humanitarian sympathies, it lacks human warmth evoked from the insight into the negro's heart and mind. Behind the brutal expression one feels Sandburg's fascination with the cold, inorganic elements. The reader will be attracted by the sweeping rush of the words, vivid, flashing images, and the intense, flaming pictures, but after reading the poem, nothing will remain except some mood.

In treating the masses, Sandburg also perceives their tremendous force, which is similar to the natural force of "the endless tide maneuvers":

> Among the mountains I wandered and saw blue haze and red crag and was amazed . . .[33]

The Dipper slanting over the horizon's grass also made him thoughtful. And just in the same way, the millions of the poor, patient and toiling, who are more patient and toiling than mountain crags, tides, and stars, give him "the solemn thrill." The poor are "patient as the darkness of night," Sandburg says, and they are "all broken, humble ruins of nations." He presents an identification of the masses with natural forces. No poem reveals his idolatry of superhuman force so well as this poem, "Masses."

With all its exterior vividness, Sandburg's poetry lacks powerful appeal rising up from the depths of human psychology. When with the coming of the twentieth century the people's upheaval began to shake the social foundation of America, the poet showed his sensuous reaction to the violent forces of the people surging up like the angry waves. But as far as his poetry is concerned, his socialistic idea is spontaneous and simple.

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[33] Ibid., "Masses," p. 4.

In some of the other poems, a good illustration of this point is presented:

> Passing through huddled and ugly walls
> By doorways where women
> Looked from their hunger-deep eyes,
> Haunted with shadows of hunger-hands,
> Out from the huddled and ugly walls,
> I came sudden, at the city's edge,
> On a blue burst of lake,
> Long lake waves breaking under the sun
> On a spray-flung curve of shore . . .[34]

The vivid contrast between hunger-stricken women in the dirty alley and "a blue-burst" of the lake and harbor evokes the poet's amazement and wonder at the misery of the poor. But his picture tells nothing but his amazement and mood.

And when Sandburg watches passers-by coming and going along the sidewalks, he finds various hopes and frustrations impressed on the many faces:

> Throats in the clutch of a hope,
> Lips written over with strivings,
> Mouths that kiss only for love . . .
> I read them
> When you passed by.[35]

Sandburg loves an image of shadow. The passers-by in this poem are frail shadows of men who are frustrated and empty of wishes. They are merely drifting far against the

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[34] Ibid., "The Harbor," p. 5.

[35] Ibid., "Passers-by," p. 7.

background just like the obscure figures of a black-and-white picture. It does not seem that he is concerned with what kind of hopes and wishes they have.

A comparison between Sandburg's "Mamie" and Edgar Lee Masters' "Lucinda" or "Anne Rutledge" shows a big difference in the depth of the two poet's thoughts. In spite of its restrained gloomy tone, "Mamie" lacks the three-dimensional structure consisting of tone, picture, and thought. Probably the figure of a blue-eyed slender girl occurs to the reader when he says:

> And even now she beats her head against the
> bars in the same old way and wonders if
> there is a bigger place the railroads
> run to from Chicago where maybe there is
> romance
> and big things
> and real dreams
> that never go smash.[36]

A girl standing at the narrow, dark alley and looking up at the sky. But her figure fades into the background as a part of it.

In a sense, man is considered to be a mere part of his environment in modern industrial society, or a small cog of a gigantic machine. But an artist's response to such a phenomenon as the dwarfing of a human being ought not to be an unconscious resonance with it. One of the

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[36] Ibid., "Mamie," p. 17.

main defects of modernists poets, including the Imagists or the Impressionists, is that they depend for their creative impulse upon a sensuous response to the violent force of modern mechanism. An unconscious resonance with the inhuman force, a delight in self-torment, or self-pity, or a sort of sadistic pleasure in an extreme case, is often a springboard of the modernist artists.

In "Fish Crier," the character is made completely a part of the vivid scene:

> I know a Jew fish crier down on Maxwell Street
> with a voice like a north wind blowing
> over corn stubble in January.
> He dangles herring before prospective customers
> evincing a joy identical with that of
> Pavlowa dancing. . . .[37]

Even if full of gladness, a fish crier's voice is "terribly" cold "like a north wind blowing over corn stubble in January." The compactness of the vivid picture pai ted by a few lines of words, which is the trait of Sandburg's poetry, merely evokes a cold, impersonal mood. Similarly, various figures of workers and people, who have seldom, perhaps never, been described so fully before in the history of American poetry, appear in Chicago Poems: a dago shovelman eating "a noon meal of bread and bologna" by the railroad track; muckers stabbing "the sides of the ditch" and "wiping

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[37] Ibid., "Fish Crier," p. 9.

sweat off their faces / With red bandanas"; the tall dark old prize-fighter; a dynamiter whose "laugh rang like the call of gray birds filled with a glory of joy . . ."

Poems on a stone-face, an Aztec mask, Momus, a Sphinx, and a bronze statue reveal the same touch with which Sandburg treats man in the above-quoted poems. In an Aztec mask the poet has discovered a man's face which he had long wanted to see; the face is:

> Ready for the hammers of changing, changing years,
> Ready for the sleeping, sleeping years of silence. . . .
> A cry out of storm and dark, a red yell and a purple prayer,
> A beaten shape of ashes. . . .[38]

And in "Momus," Sandburg shows his fascination with superhuman force, as in "Masses." Momus gives the poet "the human ease of a mountain peak, purple, silent." Momus is "eye-witness of the spawning tides of men and women / Swarming always in a drift of millions to the dust of toil, the salt of tears . . ."[39]

Viewed in this light, Sandburg's treatments of man and nature have proved to be clearly connected with each other by his basic way of perception--the skeptical

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[38] Ibid., "Aztec Mask," p. 44.

[39] Ibid., "Momus," p. 45.

wonder at man and nature and the identification of these two, which are shown by the dominant imagery of inorganic substance. Despite the brilliance of the surface, the men he treats lack a strong impulse from within. The following poem indicates the essence of Sandburg's poetic manner in Chicago Poems:

> Gasping slowly his last days with the white plague,
> Looking from hollow eyes, calling for air,
> Desperately gesturing with wasted hands
> In the dark and dust of a house down in a slum . . .[40]

The cripple desired to be a tall sunflower "[l]ifting a golden-grown face to the summer," and wished to watch wonderingly night after night "[t]he clear silent processions of stars." All that one can find here is pessimism, wistfulness, doubt and fascination with the superhuman forces of nature. The organic view of nature held by the Romantic poets is foreign to Sandburg.

D. The Essence of Sandburg's Impressionism

Vachel Lindsay, who is often regarded as Sandburg's predecessor, revived the dreams and legends of the great prairie for the American people, who were departing from them under the influence of the twentieth-century machine civilization, when he sang:

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[40] Ibid., "Cripple," p. 15.

The flower-fed buffaloes of the spring
In the days of long ago,
Ranged where the locomotives sing
And the prairie flowers lie low:--
And tossing, blooming, perfumed grass
Is swept away by the wheat,
Wheels and wheels and wheels spin by
In the spring that still is sweet.
But the flower-fed buffaloes of the spring
Left us, long ago. . . .[41]

But Lindsay could think of his age and the future only in terms of the great prairie where the spring was still sweet. He could not accept the roar of the locomotives into his poetic world, which was filled with the pathos caused by the loss of "the tossing, blooming, perfumed grass . . . swept away by the wheat."

Therefore, as far as Chicago Poems is concerned, there is no affinity between Sandburg and Lindsay. Sandburg's "Chicago" is colored by the explosive images of the brutal city "laughing with white teeth," with "dust all over his mouth," "flinging magnetic curses." Lindsay's fear of the locomotives was not shared by the Chicago poet. The American poetic scene was expanded by Sandburg's treatment of the raw materials which hitherto had been excluded from the province of the poet. In this respect almost all critics agree in their evaluations of Sandburg; for example,

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[41]Vachel Lindsay, "The Flower-Fed Buffaloes," quoted from Modern American Poetry and Modern British Poetry, ed. by Louis Untermeyer (New York, 1950), p. 247.

Louise Bogan, who is bitterly critical of Sandburg's later work, says:

> Sandburg . . . broadened the field by his descriptions of scenes of industry: of the packing houses, the mills, and the factories at the outskirts of the cities, by which the cities were fed and of which the cities were somewhat ashamed. And this industrial grime, stench, grinding, shriek, and clatter is celebrated by Sandburg, as well as described.[42]

It would be a great mistake, however, to consider Sandburg as merely or even primarily a poet of American industrialism. Indeed he made a positive and violent response to industrial society, but his poetic representation has another side, which may reflect a troubled indecisiveness. One can say that the two aspects of Chicago Poems which are represented by "Chicago" and "Fog" are, despite the difference in appearance, essentially the same in his basic poetic perceptions, as has been establishe in the previous two sections.

"Chicago" is characterized by Sandburg's violently sensuous reaction to the brutal force of modern industrialism; on this point, Amy Lowell's words are suggestive:

> Mr. Sandburg is like a man striving to batter down a jail with balls of brightly coloured glass. He may well alter points of view by focussing them

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[42]Louise Bogan, Achievement in American Poetry: 1900-1950 (Chicago, 1915), pp. 46-7.

> upon his spheres of iridescent light, but not by shooting these same spheres from a cannon.[43]

On the other hand, "Fog" and "Nocturne . . ." are not a romantic expression of the organic beauty of Nature; as seen through the poet's eyes, everything in the natural world emits cold light. In other words, organic nature is reduced in his poetic world to inorganic substance.

The brutality of "Chicago" and the tenderness of "Fog," therefore, cannot be essential to the difference between the two aspects of Sandburg's poetry. The ambivalence in Chicago Poems might be explained best as the difference between eloquent speech and monologue. The former is marked by an epic tone; the latter, by a lyric sentiment. Such poems as "Chicago," "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter," etc., are typical examples of his epic type in that he attempts to tell the reader eloquently some aspects of society rather than to sing them. But even in such a case, Sandburg is essentially a lyric poet in the sense that he is mainly concerned with composing colorful pictures and evoking moods.

The essence of Sandburg's poetic world lies in his sensuous empathy with the impersonal mechanism of modern society and to the inorganic side of nature. It might be

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[43]Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (New York, 1917), pp. 200-32.

said that his agnosticism is felt rather than thought and that, since empathy with natural and superhuman force is the basic motive of his poetic creation, his technique is impressionistic naturalism.

Thus his sensuous treatment of man and things received a severe denunciation from many critics; for instance, Edmund Wilson criticizes Sandburg as one of "the vers librists," who are victims of a bourgeois aesthetic which began to destroy "the rules of harmony and order and measure and taste" with the coming of the industrial revolution. In taking up the case of "poor Mr. Sandburg," Wilson blames him by saying that his "bare prosaic, sordid" free verse exactly fits his Chicago, which has no harmony, no beauty, and no atmosphere for artistic creation, and goes on to say:

> [I]f he had been born in France, . . . his mind would have been pervaded by harmony as soon as he could see and hear. . . . One is bored by the dryness of his emotions and the poverty of his vocabulary. He cannot rise among these noble abstractions with a free sweep of wings. He can walk the streets with sympathy, but he cannot fly among the clouds.[44]

Although the article correctly points out Sandburg's defects, it completely ignores his efforts to find poetry in the slag of modern industrial society, which had never seen

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[44]Edmund Wilson, "The Anarchists of Taste," Vanity Fair (November 20, 1920), quoted from Golden's Carl Sandburg, pp. 177-9.

a poetic expression before. Sandburg, one might say, at least succeeded in evoking vivid pictures of the new civilization and deep sympathy toward the oppressed.

What is more important here, however, is Sandburg's relation to contemporary literary movements--Imagism and the Midwestern revolt against the Genteel Tradition. If these elements are overlooked, one can understand only half of the essence of Sandburg's poetry.

In the earlier Twentieth century, Sandburg's use of Imagist technique was pointed out by some critics, including Amy Lowell and Alfred Kreymberg.[45] Sandburg himself maintained that he would cut all words ending in ity and ness--words describing "state of being"--in search of "the picture words like Chinese characters."[46] And his praise of Ezra Pound as the best poet in England and America indicates that he attempted to learn Pound's poetic technique. After appreciative analysis of Pound's poetry, Sandburg quotes Pound's words:

> Poetry is a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres and the like, but equations for the human emotions. If one has a mind which inclines to magic rather than science, one will prefer to

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[45]Lowell, op. cit., Alfred Kreymberg, "Carl Sandburg's New Book," Poetry (December, 1918), pp. 155-61.

[46]Walter Yust, "Carl Sandburg: Human Being," The Bookman, LII (January 1921), 280-90.

> speak of these equations as spells or incantations; it sounds more arcane, mysterious, recondite.[47]

If these words are compared with Sandburg's "Tentative (First Model) Definitions of Poetry" in Good Morning, America, one can find some affinity; there he says, "Poetry is a mystic, sensuous mathematics of fire, smoke-stacks, waffles, pansies, people, and purple sunsets."[48]

And in comparing these words of Sandburg with some passages of T. E. Hulme's Speculations, one finds that they exactly fit Hulme's idea of poetry:

> Literature, like memory, selects only the vivid patches of life. If literature (realistic) did really resemble life, it would be interminable, dreary, commonplace, eating and dressing, buttoning, with here and there a patch of vividness.
> Life is composed of exquisite moments and the rest is shadows of them.[49]

Cannot it be said that Sandburg's basic imagery of inorganic substance and his sensitive and momentary response to it find a theoretical expression in these words?

T. E. Hulme, who is considered to be forerunner of the Imagists, also left some imagistic pieces, several

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[47]Quoted in Sandburg, "The Work of Ezra Pound," Poetry (February, 1916), pp. 249-57.

[48]Sandburg, Complete Poems (New York, 1950), pp. 317-9.

[49]T. E. Hulme, Speculations (New York, 1924), quoted from Glenn Hughes' Imagism and the Imagists (New York, 1960), pp. 19-21.

of which, surprisingly enough, have a similarity to some of Sandburg's poems:

> A touch of cold in the Autumn night--
> I walked abroad,
> And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
> Like a red-faced farmer.
> I did not stop to speak, but nodded,
> And round about were the wistful stars
> With white like town children.[50]

One will immediately recall Sandburg's poems about the moon. It is needless to add comments, if "Child Moon" is quoted here:

> The child's wonder
> At the old moon
> Comes back nightly.
> She points her finger
> To the far silent yellow thing
> Shining through the branches
> Filtering on the leaves a golden sand,
> Crying with her little tongue, "See the moon!"
> And in her bed fading to sleep
> With babblings of the moon on her little mouth.[51]

According to Harry Golden's Carl Sandburg, there grew a warm friendship between Sandburg and Pound in the earlier decade of the twentieth century.[52] Probably it was through Pound's influence that Sandburg studied Japenese haiku poetry. And Gay Wilson Allen denies Sandburg's resemblance to Whitman and emphasizes some similarity in his

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[50] Hulme, "Autumn," quoted from Hughes, Imagism and the Imagists, p. 18.

[51] Sandburg, Complete Poems (New York, 1950), p. 60.

[52] Harry Golden, Carl Sandburg (New York, 1916), pp. 166-69.

poetry to metaphysical poetry and haiku in its imaginative picture, evocative delicacy, and "deeply etched implication."[53] Sandburg himself, referring to the writing of "Fog," says, "About 'Fog' . . . I had been sousing myself, soaking myself, in the Japanese poetry of Haikus. . . ."[54]

Pound's "A Stray Document" shows that "Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective" and rhythm "in the sequence of the musical phrase" were emphasized by the Imagists as their basic principles. In Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology, these principles were developed more concretely: the significance of the use of the common speech and "the exact words," the creation of new rhythms (free-verse), "absolute freedom in the choice of subject," the presentation of image, creation of "hard and clear" poetry, and so forth.[55] As a member of the free-verse movement, Sandburg certainly is strongly linked to the Imagists, especially in "Direct treatment of the 'thing,'" cadence rhythm, and the use of common speech.

As Louise Bogan points out, Imagism was a reflection of the intellectual and artistic atmosphere in earlier

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[53]Gay W. Allen, "Carl Sandburg, Fire and Smoke," The South Atlantic Quarterly, LIX (Summer 1960), pp. 315-29.

[54]Golden, op. cit., p. 149.

[55]Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology, ed. Amy Lowell, (Boston, 1915), quoted from Hughes' Imagism . . ., pp. 39-40.

twentieth-century Europe and its influence upon the U.S., which was exemplified in painting by Post-Impressionism.[56] It was a new trend founded on the ruins of naturalistic determinism; the only thing that the artists could believe was the response of their own sensibility to the mechanism of modern society, which began to show its cold and impersonal quality like that of inorganic substance. Although the Imagist Movement, despite its high ambitions, left no particular fruit with very few exceptions, it exerted a great influence, direct and indirect, upon the succeeding modernist poets, particularly in their conscious efforts to polish technique.

The free-verse movement as a whole in the earlier twentieth century also showed a fierce revolt against nineteenth-century Romanticism. Especially in America, the tremendous development of industry, the end of the westward movement, and the coming of millions of immigrants were destined to find a new artistic expression. The revolt was, therefore, naturally intended to push away puritanical and Victorian moralism, as was typically shown when Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie was published and immediately suppressed.

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[56]Bogan, op. cit., pp. 1-10, 15, 33, 47.

In the nineteen-twenties, however, after Imagism retreated from the poetic front, the American poetic scene came to be divided into roughly two groups--the modern aesthetic experimentalists and expatriates (Pound, T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, etc.) and the poets of Americanism (Lindsay, Masters, Sandburg, and later Stephen Vincent Benét, Archibald MacLeish, etc.). Thus, the above-mentioned revolt against the Genteel Tradition was inherited mainly by the latter group--the poets of Americanism. It must be admitted here, however, that unless any new literary movement establishes its basic idea and principles firmly, it is bound to disappear. Amy Lowell could not leave good poems able to stand the ordeal of history because she did not have an idea to unify her colorful images. Pound, who later left the Imagist Movement, continuously sought new poetic experiments, especially in technique. Here one must remember Matthew Arnold's words that "For poetry the idea is everything."[57] In this sense, T. S. Eliot's rediscovery of John Donne, along with his immense knowledge of classical literature and philosophy, laid the foundation of twentieth-century anti-romanticism.

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[57]Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," quoted from The Portable Matthew Arnold, ed. Lionel Trilling (New York, 1949), p. 299.

On the other hand, on what basis did Sandburg create his poetic world? In spite of his affinity with the Imagists, Sandburg's biggest difference from them lies in his participation in the Midwestern revolt against the Genteel Tradition of Eastern America, together with other members of the so-called Chicago group. Sherwood Anderson, a member of the group, stated their hopes and ambitions in those days:

> It was during that summer that I met Carl Sandburg . . . It was the time in which something blossomed in Chicago and the Middle West. Dreiser from Terre Haute in Indiana had written and published Sister Carrie and Norris who already had written McTeague was fighting for Dreiser as Dreiser later was to fight for me . . . Edgar Lee Masters had written his Spoon River Anthology; down the state Vachel Lindsay was shouting forth his stirring verses; Sandburg was writing his magical Chicago Poems. . . . All over the country indeed there was an outbreak of new poets. Something which had been very hard in American life was beginning to crack, and in our group we often spoke of it hopefully. And how exciting it was. Something seemingly new and fresh was in the very air we breathed. . . .[58]

Viewed in this light, one can say that Chicago Poems occupies a significant position in the literary history of the United States as an expression of the young voices of new America. But so long as poetry is the expression of a physical and sensuous response to the raw side of the new civilization, it is merely a superficial

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[58]Sherwood Anderson, Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs (New York, 1942), p. 241.

observation. Therefore, a poet must be essentially a thinker so that his poetry may go deeply enough to have a civilizing effect on humanity. In the case of Sandburg, although socialistic ideas underlie his poetic representation, as has been remarked in the previous section, he was as a socialist a feeler, not a thinker. There is no vision of the future found in Chicago Poems; in place of that, dubious uncertainty, sensuous love of the masses, and worship of superhuman power are obviously remarkable. Thus one can conclude here that Chicago Poems is a sensuous expression of the Midwestern revolt against the Genteel Tradition and the new civilization. But later Sandburg was to find something reliable as a philosophical basis of poetic representation. In this sense, some changes began to appear gradually in his second volume of poetry. Perhaps some inkling of these changes was in his mind when he said:

> There is a group of us in the United States, . . . Perhaps you'd call us a type--who are struggling along after a kind of freedom. We are not sure we are writing poetry. . . . We may never win this freedom; maybe we'll be interesting to future generations only because we are a step toward a higher development. I don't know.[59]

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[59]Yust, op. cit., p. 280.

Sandburg stands far ahead of his predecessor, Vachel Lindsay, both in his treatment of industrial America and in his modernist idea and technique, but eventually he was to follow Lindsay's footsteps in his search for the folk tradition.

CHAPTER III

SANDBURG'S LATER FOLKLORISM

A. Prairie and Steel

Before Sandburg found his new direction in folklorism, he evidently spent some time searching for a resolution to the poetic problems which beset him. His second, third, and fourth books--Cornhuskers (1918), Smoke and Steel (1920), and Slabs of the Sunburnt West (1922)--display this search. Within the broad limits of impressionism, which way should he go? Torn between conflicting epic and lyric tendencies, which should he follow? Having come to some measure of success, what should he do now?

An examination of these volumes will show that they reveal a conscious or unconscious uncertainty. As Sandburg follows now this, now that vein which he discovered in his first volume, follows each farther than he had taken it previously, he gets more and more distant from a unifying center. He is drawn to American faces and scenes, to the superhuman force of industrialism, to introspection and self-examination, to philosophical fatalism, to a half-socialistic celebration of the laboring class, to pessimistic broodings on history, and to a mystical contemplation of God and nature. In short, Sandburg gropes through

the world within and world without, through philosophy, politics, and religion, seeking some theme around which all his poetic efforts can coalesce.

Sandburg's second book of verse, Cornhuskers, contains no harsh, violent poems of belligerent radicalism like those in Chicago Poems, and a softening became remarkably dominant. Even some poems which at first glance seem to have a radical tone, for instance, "Always the Mob" and "Memoir of a Proud Boy," show a surprisingly deeper mellowness, and even melancholy. When he sings in the former poem:

> The mob? A typhoon tearing loose an island
> from thousand-year moorings and bastions,
> shooting a volcanic ash with a fire tongue
> that licks up cities and peoples. Layers of
> worms eating rocks and forming loam and
> valley floors for potatoes, wheat, water-
> melons.
>
> The mob? A jag of lightning, a geyser, a
> gravel mass loosening . . .
> I am born in the mob--I die in the mob--the
> same goes for you--
> I don't care who you are. . . .[1]

one can find no more his sensational worship of the force of the masses, as in "I Am the People, the Mob." And "Memoir of a Proud Boy," an elegy for Don Macgregor, who was a labor-class hero of the Ludlow massacre, is marked

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[1]Carl Sandburg, "Always the Mob," Complete Poems (New York, 1950), pp. 110-11.

by a deep sorrow and a suppressed anger rather than by a bombastic style. In addition, most of the poems in Cornhuskers are colored by the poet's mellower perception of the American people and land. He warmly and eloquently, but softly, speaks to the reader about the Midwestern prairie, a village in late summer, the street band, an Illinois farmer, a washerwoman, Buffalo Bill, Old Osawatamie, and so forth. Obviously Sandburg was attempting to discover something enduring and valuable in the land and the people in the Middle West.

> The Prairie sings to me in the forenoon and I know in the night I rest easy in the prairie arms, on the prairie heart. . . .
>
> After the sunburn of the day
> handling a pitchfork at a hayrack,
> after the eggs and biscuit and coffee,
> the pearl-gray haystacks
> in the gloaming
> are cool prayers
> to the harvest hands. . . .[2]

Man's victory over the wilderness and man's sweat and blood are praised highly here. Sandburg's outlook is extended to the dreams in his boyhood as a hobo and to the days of pioneer hardships. This is evidently a sign of the turning of his poetic expression toward folklorism. The reader feels a fresh wind blowing over the great prairie when he sings:

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[2]"Prairie," Ibid., pp. 79-85.

O prairie girl, be lonely, singing, dreaming,
waiting--your lover comes--your child comes--
the years creep with toes of April rain on
new-turned sod. . . .[3]

The images of dust and ashes, unlike those of Chicago Poems, seem to assume a brighter color and a new hope:

I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes,
I tell you yesterday is a wind gone down,
a sun dropped in the west. . . .[4]

Throughout the poem, however, he speaks about the land, the people, and the cities with a tone of reverence for superhuman force. Here is also an identification of human and superhuman forces, as in Chicago Poems. This basic attitude of Sandburg's underlies most of the other poems of Cornhuskers. At one time, a worship of tremendous power is sung in terms of prayers of steel:

Lay me on an anvil, O God. . . .
Beat me and hammer me into a steel spike. . . .
Take red-hot rivets and fasten me into the
central girders.
Let me be the great nail holding a sky scraper
through blue nights into white stars.[5]

Here can be found his attitude toward modern industrialism. Perhaps he was the first poet who discovered poetry in steel, a symbol of modern industrial society. Prayers of

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[3]Ibid., p. 85.

[4]Ibid., p. 85.

[5]"Prayers of Steel," Ibid., pp. 109-110.

steel are the prayers of steel workers, whose sweat and strength go into steel and hold a big skyscraper high in the starry night. The poem is a strange mixture of Sandburg's humanitarian love of workers and his sensuous response to industry. The dominant imagery is that of cold inorganic substance, through which one senses some pessimistic feelings in the poet's idea.

And at another time, the discovery of a wilderness or of a many-sidedness within himself is expressed in terms of superhuman nature in "Wilderness."

> There is a wolf in me . . . fangs pointed
> for tearing gashes . . .
> There is an eagle in me and a mocking bird . . .
> and the eagle flies among the Rocky
> Mountains of my dreams and fights among
> the Sierra crags of what I want . . .
> I am a pal of the world: I came from
> the wilderness.[6]

Although these images of the wild animals and birds are very colorful, they reveal Sandburg's lack of intensity and unity of imagery.

Sandburg's love of cool, inorganic substance reaches its climax in several--not many--short, tender poems in Cornhuskers. The image of "the cool moist loam" implies his fatalism; man sleeps in loam, rises, and stands to a "whiff of life."

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[6]"Wilderness," Ibid., p. 100.

We stand, then,
To a whiff of life,
Lifted to the silver of the sun
Over and out of the loam
A day.[7]

Sandburg's fatalism emits a cool, drab light when he thinks that everyone turns to ashes "in the dust, in the cool tombs," even Lincoln, Ulysses Grant, and Pocahontas' body "lovely as a poplar, sweet as a red haw in November or / a pawpaw in May . . ." and he asks dubiously:

. . . tell me if the lovers
are losers . . . tell me if any get more than
lovers . . . in the dust . . . in the cool
tombs.[8]

After all, one finds that the bright color in "Prairie" is an exceptional representation in Cornhuskers. A short piece, "Grass," also reveals the poet's fatalistic view of life; numerous dead bodies were piled and reduced to bones in many battle fields--at Austerlitz, Waterloo, Gettysburg, Ypres, and Verdun--and the grass, as the witness of these human follies, whispers:

I am the grass
Let me work. . . .[9]

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[7]"Loam," Ibid., p. 98.

[8]"Cool Tombs," Ibid., p. 134.

[9]"Grass," Ibid., p. 136.

Here the grass is a symbol of the natural force which reduces man to dust. It might be said that the doubt and agnosticism in Chicago Poems appears here as fatalism or deeper melancholy, and, therefore, that some pessimistic feelings are noticeable along with a far softer tone in this second volume of Sandburg's verse.

His imagistic technique based on his sensuous perception is superbly effective in "Cool Tombs," in that visual and thermal images are fascinatingly combined in it. A rural scene in a Midwestern small town is also described colorfully by the same imagistic technique in "Band Concert."

> Band concert public square Nebraska City.
> Flowing and circling dresses, summer-white
> dresses. Faces, flesh tints flung like
> sprays of cherry blossoms. And gigglers,
> God knows, gigglers, rivaling the pony
> whinnies of the Livery Stable Blues. . . .[10]

These visual images make a superb contrast with the following auditory images in "Jazz Fantasia":

> Drum on your drums, batter on your banjoes,
> sob on the long cool winding saxophones.
> Go to it, O jazzmen. . . .
>
> Can the rough stuff . . . now a Mississippi
> steamboat pushes up the night river with a
> hoo-hoo-hoo-oo . . . and the green lanterns
> calling to the high soft stars . . .

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[10]"Band Concert," Ibid., p. 90.

Moan like an autumn wind high in the lonesome
treetops, moan soft like you wanted somebody
terrible, cry like a racing car slipping away
from a motorcycle cop, bang-bang! . . .[11]

Can it not be said that there exists a sense of tedium behind the vivid images of colors and primitive sounds?

In the title piece of Sandburg's third collection of poetry, Smoke and Steel, a smokestack going up from the chimney of a steel factory and drifting above the vast prairie is raised to a symbolical level by his characteristic technique--the rhythms of eloquent speech, the effective repetition of lines, and the imagistic evocation of vivid pictures:

Smoke of a brick-red dust
winds on a spiral
Out of the stacks . . .

A bar of steel--it is only
Smoke at the heart of it, smoke and the blood
of a man.
A runner of fire ran in it, ran out, ran somewhere else,
And left--smoke and the blood of a man
And the finished steel, chilled and blue . . .[12]

These lines show that Sandburg's sensuous reaction to the cool mechanism of industry is not essentially different from that of "Chicago"; a number of colorful images in other parts of the poem also indicate

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[11]"Jazz Fantasia," Ibid., p. 179.

[12]"Smoke and Steel," Ibid., pp. 151-52.

the fact: "laughing tombs," "the rusty dust," "gibbering gorilla arms of fire, gold mudpiers, gold bird-wings, red jackets riding purple mules," "pearl cobwebs," "a pool of moonshine," "sleeps with a coat of rust, a vest of moths, a shirt of gathering sod and loam," and so on.

As for its ideas, however, this poem has somewhat greater profundity both in its symbolic touch and in its insight into man. When he says, "Smoke into steel and blood into steel, . . . / Smoke and blood is the mix of steel," the poem assumes deep sympathy with the workers; and he continues:

> One of them workers said: "I like my job, the company is good to me, America is a wonderful country."
> One: "Jesus, my bones ache; the company is a liar; this is a free country, like hell."[13]

But the poem lacks a vision of the future; again there is a sense of wonder and bewilderment:

> Smoke, smoke lost in the sieves of yesterday;
> Dumped again to the scoops and hooks today. . . .
> Smoke night now.
> Tomorrow something else.
> . . . . . .[14]

"Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind," in a sense is a successor to "Prairie" in Cornhuskers; Sandburg's outlook is on the history of the nation: strong

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[13] Ibid., p. 154.

[14] Ibid., p. 153. The line of dots appears in the original and is quoted as an expression of Sandburg's dubiousness.

men once "put up a city and got / a nation together" and many people sang:

> We are the greatest city,
> the greatest nation,
> Nothing like us ever was.[15]

His well known words--"The past is a bucket of ashes"--are repeated here again, but they have no confident tone: now the only singers of the old song are crows crying, "Caw, Caw," and the only listeners are ". . . the rats . . . and the lizards." The past no longer tells anything about the great nation; the past is "the hieroglyphs of the rat footprints" and "the dust on a doorsill shifts."[16] This pessimistic tone makes a big difference between poem and "Prairie."

"The Windy City" in Sandburg's fourth book of verse, The Slabs of the Sunburnt West, indicates some change in his poetic expression, which is made more clear by a comparison with "Chicago," "Prairie," "Smoke and Steel," and "Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind." The most significant trait of the poem is its broader outlook on the historical background and its larger scale in composition; "Chicago," by comparison, was a bolder etching with powerful directness.

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[15]"Four Preludes on Playthings of the Winds," Ibid., p. 184.

[16]Ibid., p. 185.

Noticeable here is Sandburg's awareness of the history of Chicago from the days of "the lean hands of wagon men to those of skyscrapers": he says, "the junk of the earth" was shaped to a new city and "the junk stood up into skyscrapers," and:

> I am Chicago, I am a name given out by the breaths of working men, laughing men, a child, a belonging.[17]

Another remarkable trait of the poems is Sandburg's use of American folk humor; when one listens to "the black cataracts of people go by," whispers can be heard:

> Hush baby,
> It ain't how old you are,
> It's how old you look.
> It ain't what you got,
> It's what you can get away with.[18]

A proverbial comparison is also effectively used in the poem: "Chicago fished from its depths a text: Independent / as a hog on ice." This is worthy of notice as an evidence of Sandburg's interest in American folk materials at this time. As will be shown in a later chapter, two years before publishing Slabs of the Sunburnt West Sandburg began including folk songs as a part of his lectures.

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[17]"Windy City," Ibid., p. 272.

[18]Ibid., p. 274.

Finally the poet finds some hope in the image of the windy city. Some day the city will fall to pieces:

> It is wisdom to think tomorrow new working men,
> new laughing men, may come and put up a
> new city
> Living lighted skyscrapers and a night lingo
> of lanterns testify tomorrow shall have
> its own say-so.[19]

As in "Prairie" and "Four Preludes . . .," the poem is closed by a high-toned apostrophe:

> Winds of the Windy City,
> Winds of corn and sea blue,
> Spring wind white and fighting winter gray,
> Come home here--they nickname a city for you. . . .[20]

The other poems of the book, especially "Washington Monument by Night," "And So Today," and the title poem, "Slabs of the Sunburnt West," indicate the changing trend; particularly the last one is marked by a prayerful quality in his admiration of the sublime view of the Grand Canyon and interview with God. Through its mystic veil appear Sandburg's bewilderment and sense of man's incompetence:

> My head is under your foot, God.
> My head is a pan of alkali dust
> your foot kicked loose--your foot of air
> with its steps on the sunset airpath haze.[21]

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[19] Ibid., p. 278-80.

[20] Ibid., p. 281.

[21] Ibid., p. 310.

Yet in spite of his search for something enduring in America as a foundation for his poetic representation, Sandburg could not find anything powerful enough to focus on. His basic attitude--invocation of and empathy with the natural force--is still basically the same as ever.

Viewed in this light, despite some change in his poetic expression, the repetition of earlier mannerisms in Sandburg's second, third, and fourth books of poetry to some extent indicate puzzlement in his search for a new poetic ground. Many years later, looking backward over his earlier days, he said, "I have forgotten the meaning of twenty or thirty of my poems written thirty or forty years ago. . . . I have written by different methods and in a wide miscellany of moods . . ."[22] This is the confession of the puzzlement, disunity, and mannerism of his poetic representation as he searched for a satisfying mode of expression.

Through the puzzlement, however, it might be said, he made his way gradually and hesitatingly along a line--a manifestation of an epic tone in search of a new outlook on the American scene, history, and tradition. We have seen the beginnings of his new outlook--folklorism--growing out of his early work. The broad matrix was Sandburg's concern with the American scene and people;

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[22]Ibid., "Notes for a Preface," p. xxix.

specifically we have seen the folk idiom appearing in "The Windy City" as pointing in the direction in which Sandburg was to go.

Six years after the publication of Slabs of the Sunburnt West, the results of his search began to show themselves more clearly in Good Morning, America. In this sense, the book formed a significant turning point in Sandburg's career as a poet. In its title poem, his imagination flies and wanders around all over America, from the skyscrapers in big cities to the Rocky Mountains "stacked tall on the skyline," from Illinois to West Virginia, Minnesota, Kentucky, Arizona, and all other states. His outlook on the history of America is also broad enough to catch the images of heroes--Leif Ericson, Columbus, Washington, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses Grant, Robert E. Lee, and Abraham Lincoln--and millions of courageous pioneers "riding horses, sitting in saddles, smelling of leather . . . ." And what is most significant, he introduced large numbers of "the proverbs of a people, a nation" for the first time into his poetry. In short, he tried to let this long poem stand as a paean to the people's strength and energy which made the sky-scrapers a symbol of American civilization.

But his pathetic question--"What are the facts?"--runs throughout the poem. "Facts are facts, nailed down,

fastened to stay," and "Blood and sweat are facts," but facts are also "phantom" and "fly with bird wings." Thus a number of questions are flung to many things, to flowers, history, steel, coal, oil, God and many others: "Is a flower a fact?" and so forth. In spite of everything, his image of America is still wrapped in a skeptical sad tone:

> In God we trust; it is so written. . . .
> The fact: God is the Great One who made us all.
> We is you and me and all of us in the United States of America.
> And trusting God means we give ourselves, all of ourselves, the whole United States of America, to God, the great one.
> Yes . . . Perhaps . . . is that so?[23]

Sandburg promises the reader nothing, because "there are too many promises." All he can give is the command: "Go alone . . . go with your heart into the / storm of human hearts and see if somewhere in that storm there are / bleeding hearts, sacred hearts taking bitter wages of doom . . ."[24] This is a brilliant statement which indicates the most significant function of literature, but it is what Sandburg's poetry lacks most--a deep insight into the individual human heart.

And immediately another voice of his command sounds:

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[23]"Good Morning, America," Ibid., p. 332.

[24]Ibid., p. 333.

> Walk again where the mass human shadows foregather,
> where the silhouettes and pantomimes of the
> great human procession wind with a crying
> outland, and rotten laughters mix with raging
> tumults . . .[25]

No words can express the essence of his poetry more clearly. The words, in a sense, also indicate the conclusion which he had reached in his search for a new mode of poetic expression from the days of Cornhuskers to those of Good Morning, America. What he loved most is "the mass human shadows" and "silhouettes and pantomimes" of "the great human procession" squirming in "raging tumults." And his tone in this poem as a whole is strangely tragic and pathetic in spite of his high-toned salutation and apostrophe to his native ground in the following words:

> . . . we, us, the people, . . .
> "We are here! We belong! look at us!"
> Good Morning, America!
> Morning goes as morning-glories go!
> High noon goes, afternoon goes!
> Twilight, sundown, gloaming--
> . . . Good night, America!
> Good night, sleep, peace, and sweet dreams![26]

When one looks back over Sandburg's career as a poet from 1916 to 1930, one finds that all the traits of his poetry are closely interlinked with each other; his

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[25] Ibid., p. 334.

[26] Ibid., p. 335.

love of the imagery of inorganic substance and superhuman force, his refusal of the past, and his lack of a vision of the future reveal themselves as fatalism or pessimism. And thus, his imagistic technique shows its greatest effect in such short, melancholy lyrics as "Cool Tombs" and "Grass."

It must be emphasized here that his pessimism is only the result of the disappointment of his hopes for mankind, and that these hopes are clear evidence of his profound, humanitarian love of people; thus he was not such a sentimental, optimistic propagandist as some critics have believed.

In this light, Sandburg is essentially a pessimistic poet. Yet, he evidently attempted to overcome his pessimism; his search for a new outlook on the American tradition, which was clearly shown in Good Morning, America, was the manifestation of this attempt, for it demonstrated that he was trying to find a creed based on faith in ordinary humanity.

Thus, a gnomic quality and a psalmist's tone became more noticeable in his work, along with a prosaic style and an epic quality. But one must not overlook the fact that his basic poetic representation can be described essentially as impressionism combined with the imagistic technique, as shown in his invocation to the wind and in his love of

the image of "the mass human shadows" and "silhouettes."

As far as Good Morning, America is concerned, his attempt to overcome pessimism was unsuccessful; his poetic imagery could not get a clear focus amid "the mass human shadows." In order to show this conclusion more convincingly, another study must be made from a different angle in the following two sections.

B. Sandburg and Folksongs

As pointed out in the first chapter, after the eclipse of the Imagist Movement, American poets came to be divided roughly into two entirely opposite groups--the aesthetic or metaphysical experimentalists and the poets of the American stream who attempted to express the American experience through American diction. The former made its way toward the aesthetic refinement of poetry; the latter, toward the expression of tumultuous America filled with new energy. Hart Crane stands in a unique position as a genius who died young in his desperate attempt to bridge the gap between the two streams of modern American poetry.

Viewed in this light, Sandburg's efforts to make poetry close to the American language and soil is suggestive of the significant destiny which modern poetry has undergone. The drastic division of the American poetic

scene, in a sense, reflects a tremendous change in the function of language in modern society due to the rapid development of various media of communication. The biggest change in the appreciation of poetry was that it came to be read in an individual private study as printed matter, and at the same time, away from popular taste, poetry has tended to be more difficult for common readers to understand.

On the other hand, Vachel Lindsay's artistic achievement as a minstrel poet in the earlier twentieth century is of great importance in that he established a new poetic ground by reviving the authentically native American flavor of the half-gone pioneer days. Through his tramping tours, on which he sold poetry for food and lodging and chanted poems to audiences from a platform, he not only kindled the dream of a camp meeting and a vast prairie, but also tried to embody the ideal relationship between a folk poet and the folk. To use Robert E. Spiller's words:

> The melody and sound pictures of the poems of The Congo captured the sweeping rhythms of the prairie, the clatter of the city, and the sinuous echoes of a forgotten African jungle. Americans who could not understand what a poem said were caught up in the meaning of pure sound as the towheaded jazz revivalist chanted, shouted, and whispered his lines from the platform of college lecture hall or county fair.[27]

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[27]Robert E. Spiller, The Cycle of American Literature: An Essay in Historical Criticism (New York, 1955), p. 178.

But could Lindsay share the happiness of the creator of folk songs and ballads in the pastoral days? Could he share the people's joy, sorrow, imagination, and thought as a minstrel poet? Could he achieve his romantic ideal of a life close to nature and people? The negative answers to these questions are underlined by his tragic suicide. And how about Sandburg, the Chicago poet? Before examining this question, it is necessary to know the influence of folk tradition upon the two poets.

The folk rhythms, techniques, and materials can be traced easily in Lindsay's poetry; "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight," "In Praise of Johnny Appleseed," "The Santa-Fe Trail," "The Congo," "The Ghost of the Buffaloes," and many other poems are all characteristic of the unequalled vividness of his pastoral visions and the richness of his folk subjects. On the other hand, however, in the case of Sandburg, as far as poetic technique is concerned, there is little evident trace of the influence of folk songs.

According to Karl Detzer's biography of Sandburg, his interest in folk songs and ballads started in his boyhood, when he wandered as a hobo throughout the Midwestern states. Wherever he went, he carefully listened to the songs of stockyard workers, cowboys, farm hands, negroes, rivermen, and millworkers, making a habit of putting down the words and memorizing the tunes. He bought an old guitar and

"sang his way around the country," looking for jobs.[28] Later this habit resulted in the publication of The American Songbag. One can say that it is through these experiences that he adopted American lingo for his poetic diction to express his love for the people and the American scene. Unlike Lindsay, he was probably more concerned with the contents of folk materials than with the technique.

Later Sandburg and a guitar came to be considered inseparable. It was at Cornell College, Iowa, in 1920 that Sandburg first appeared before audiences as a folk singer. After a lecture, he took a guitar and said:

> I will now sing a few folk songs that somehow tie into the folk quality I have tried to get into my verse. They are all authentic songs people have sung for years. If you don't care for them and want to leave the hall it will be all right with me.[29]

And then he sang "Jesse James," Negro and steamboat songs, farmer's songs, and so on. Detzer vividly describes this first performance as a folk singer:

> Students who had come expecting to find a pale and fragile poet were astonished, then delighted. Here stood a tall, rangy man with iron-gray hair and with deep weather-lines in his face, a man in a blue serge suit a bit baggy at the knees, a light-blue shirt with a frayed collar and a nondescript cravat, a man

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[28]Karl Detzer, Carl Sandburg: A Study in Personality and Background (New York, 1941), pp. 71-2.

[29]Harry Golden, Carl Sandburg (New York, 1961), p. 79.

> whose shoes could have used a shine. . . . The next week the college paper said, "He stood before the people, calm, serene, recognizing their brotherhood . . . no tricks of the entertainer . . . vigorous, stimulating . . . might be a steel worker or a miner."[30]

Since that day Sandburg's performance of folk songs has been added as part of the lectures for which he was invited to many universities, colleges, and literary groups. The following poster tells his popularity as a platform singer rather than a poet:

AMERICAN FOLKLORE
With Reading From His Own Poems
CARL SANDBURG
Tuesday evening--March 10th
Benefit--Albany League of Women Voters
Tickets at $1.00 at 8:30 o'clock[31]

The following anecdote is a good example of his skill in singing: at the dinner party given for Sinclair Lewis, who came home from a two-year trip to Europe in 1929, Sandburg sang "The Buffalo Skinners"; according to the newspaper:

> It was like a funeral song to the pioneer America that is gone. And when Carl was done Sinclair Lewis spoke up, his face streaked with tears. "That's the America I came home to. That's it."[32]

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[30]Detzer, op. cit., p. 153.

[31]Golden, op. cit., p. 80.

[32]Lloyd Lewis, an article in The Chicagoan, (August 17, 1929), quoted from Golden's Carl Sandburg, pp. 80-1.

Thus a picture and cartoon of Sandburg playing a guitar began to appear in a number of journals. Yet these images of Sandburg the folk singer are far from what he essentially is as a poet.

There are several great differences between Lindsay and Sandburg: the former had a passionately religious fervor as an evangelical revivalist along with his romantic insistence upon the by-gone pastoral days, while Sandburg was never free from the pessimism and the sensuous response to industry which underlay his Imagist technique. In other words, his modern impressionism, which he retained in his later works, too, is quite different in quality from Lindsay's romanticism. Therefore, one cannot say that Sandburg is "a minstrel poet" in the strict sense of the term, and it is definitely wrong to judge his poetry as that of a folk singer.

It was in a different way that Sandburg followed Lindsay. In The American Songbag, he was mainly concerned with the heterogeneity of the American folk tradition; he did not insist on the pastoral aspect of the folk materials, as did Lindsay, who was essentially a romanticist. In the introduction of the book, he defines his collection of folk songs as "a rag bag of strips, streaks of color from nearly all ends of the earth," and "the great native

American grand opera." He thought that "a wide human procession marches" in the collection of folk songs:

> The rich and the poor; robbers, murderers, hangmen; fathers and wild boys; mothers with soft words for their babies; workmen on railroads, steamboats, ships; wanderers and lovers of homes, tell what life has done to them. Love and hate in many patterns and designs, heart cries of high and low pitch, are in these verses and tunes. . . . Its human turmoil is terrific. Blasphemies from low life and blessings from high life for baritone or soprano are brought together . . . Curses, prayers, jigs and jokes, mix here out of the blue mist of the past. It is a volume full of gargoyles and gnomes, a terribly tragic book and one grinningly tragic. . . .[33]

Here is the epitome of Sandburg's own poetic world. These words remind the reader of some similar lines in "Good Morning, America." Several words in the above quotation--"curses," "prayers," "jigs," "blue mist," "gargoyles," and "turmoil"--are also often used in his poems.

It is perhaps partly as a reflection of this chaotic world of folk tradition that he later made his thirty-eight "tentative definitions" of poetry in Good Morning, America,[34] and that in "Notes for a Preface" of his Complete Poems, he compiled a unique classification of poetry: "Chants," "Psalms," "Gnomics," "Contemplations,"

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[33]Carl Sandburg, "Prefactory Notes," The American Songbag (New York, 1927), p. viii.

[34]Ibid., pp. 317-9.

"Proverbs," Epitaphs," "Litanies," and "Incidents of intensely concentrated action or uttrance."[35]

It can be said that he intended to draw his poetry from the hearts of millions of common people, who murmur, cry, laugh, yell, and pray, and who are sometimes gay and sometimes restless and desperate in their world of "turmoil." Herein lies the essence of his poetry not only as a son of an immigrant, but also as a poet of the Midwestern revolt. He found poetry in the "terrific" "turmoil" of the heterogeneous American folk tradition. Most remarkable in The American Songbag is his interest in the epic quality of the folk songs and ballads as the crystal of people's voices, through which "history runs." This idea obviously corresponds to the change which began to appear in his second volume of poetry, and eventually his intention to be the epic voice of the people reached its climax in his last book--The People, Yes.

Here one can reach the conclusion that with his retreat from militant socialistic ideas, his sensuous response to modern machine civilization was gradually dissolved into the Midwestern "turmoil" and the chaotic world of folk tradition. What caused this change in him were his revolt against the Genteel Tradition and his refusal

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[35]Ibid., p. xxvi.

of any literary tradition of the past, because there was nothing to rely on but "turmoil" for him who refused the past. It can be said that this was quite a natural result for the Chicago poet in the sense that his new poetic world of folk tradition was also as chaotic and colorful as that represented in Chicago Poems. It is ironical and even tragical that he had to depend for his poetic expression upon the past although he rejected it by saying, "The past is a bucket of ashes." Was, then, Sandburg's past reliable enough as his new poetic ground?

C. Sandburg and His Tradition

In the last century Whitman prophesied that American poets would have to learn the American diction, hard powerful idioms and fierce words to make their poetry "the barbaric yawp." In this sense, Sandburg really answered Whitman's call. And when Henry L. Mencken quoted in his The American Language Sandburg's words--"Slang is language that takes off its coat, spits on its hands, and goes to work," he indicated that Sandburg brilliantly met the expectation of the earlier literary radicals who were fiercely against the Genteel Tradition.[36] It was no wonder that in his Prejudices Mencken also embraced Sandburg with

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[36] Henry L. Mencken, The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States (New York, 1923), pp. 369-81.

admiration: Sandburg "gets memorable effects by astonishingly austere means, as in his famous Chicago rhapsody and his Cool Tombs. And always he is thoroughly individual, a true original, his own man."[37]

Thus since his earlier days Sandburg had often been hailed as a genuine descendant of Whitman by several critics: "the singing heart of America," "a poet of the common-place [sic]," [38] "an American Homer," [39] and other praises were given to him. But of several articles which compared Sandburg with Whitman, none make any extensive analysis of the two poets. One of them asserted that Sandburg was superior to his predecessor in conciseness and naïveté, [40] and another praised Sandburg's outlook on society as being broader than Whitman's. [41] Indeed in their common origins, themes, and humanitarian ideas, the two resemble each other to some extent, but there is a vast difference between

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[37] Henry L. Mencken, "New Poetry Movement," in Prejudices (New York, 1927).

[38] Paul Lyman Benjamin, "A Poet of the Common-Place," The Survey, XXXXV (October 20, 1920), pp. 12-3.

[39] J. Nash, "Carl Sandburg, an American Homer," Open Court, XXXXIV (October 1930), pp. 633-9.

[40] E. L. Holcomb, "Whitman and Sandburg," The English Journal, XVII (September 1928), pp. 549-55.

[41] Babette Dentsch, "Poetry for the People," The English Journal, XXVI (April 1937), pp. 265-74.

Whitman's romantic mysticism and Transcendentalism and Sandburg's imagistic technique and agnosticism.

There is to be found no direct sign of Whitman's influence upon Sandburg's poetry, although he was, according to his biographer, excited about Whitman's poetry and gave lectures on it as associate editor of The Lyceumite in 1907-8.[42] And he wrote introductions to two books of Whitman's poetry, in one of which he highly praises the great poet of America:

> He [Whitman] may be a wayward, hairy, North American galoot or he may be a modern variant of a Christ or a Socrates or something of both or a mystery beyond all the epithets of even generous and tentative critical genius. . . .[43]

And yet his interest in Whitman seems to have disappeared later. Gay Wilson Allen, who is a lover of Whitman and also a writer of one of the most intensive articles on Sandburg's poetry, points out their great differences in "temperament" and in "sources of power, expecially in prosody" by saying that Whitman's traits are "line units and parallelism," but that Sandburg's versification is

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[42]Karl Detzer, op. cit., pp. 73-4.

[43]Sandburg, "Introduction" to Whitman's Poetry, Modern Library (New York, 1921), quoted from The Sandburg Range (Illinois, 1958), p. 37.

nearer that of the experimentalists.[44]

Apart from Whitman's direct influence on him, however, many critics think that Sandburg is a follower of Whitman. Matthiessen admits that "Whitman's tradition has been continuously alive" in twentieth-century American poetry, especially in Robinson, Sandburg, Lindsay, Masters, and Benét:

> Sandburg in particular has inherited Whitman's form, though we can see now that Whitman's influence extends far beyond the mere question of free verse. It is bound up with a vision of American promise, with an immersion in the stuff of our common life.[45]

And John Ciardi calls Sandburg, Lindsay, Masters, and Archibald Macleish the poets of "the barbaric yawp" as Whitman's followers, and says that they had already finished their historic role in the history of American poetry:

> America cannot happen without noise. America had to make loud poetry before it could make good poetry. The poets writing today are in a better position to write good poetry, in part because some of their ancestors showed them the perils of loud poetry.[46]

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[44]Gay Wilson Allen, "Carl Sandburg, Fire and Smoke," The South Atlantic Quarterly, LIX (Summer 1960), pp. 315-29.

[45]F. O. Matthiessen, "Introduction" to The Oxford Book of American Verse (New York, 1950), p. xxvii.

[46]John Ciardi, "Introduction" to Mid-Century American Poets (New York, 1950), pp. ix-xxx.

Sandburg himself was evidently conscious of the Whitman tradition; in his attack on the New Critics, who were very hard on him, he states:

> Down in Ohio, there's a college called Kenyon where a new movement started that designates itself "the New Criticism." It comes in cellophane and has not known the touch of human hands.
>
> Certain sacrosanct things that belong in this country and in the lives of its people don't belong in these poems, says the New Criticism. A poem should not deal with action and not with acting and should have nothing to do with leading men toward acting. It must concern itself with being.
>
> Now Walt Whitman was perhaps the head spirit of an opposite viewpoint. He took the word democracy and threw it around like a juggler does a fireball and wrestled it until it came to have something of the elements found in men's hearts and in the Gettysburg Address that made people understand the implications--that whenever men have freedom there have been men who fought for it and died for it.
>
> But even freedom itself is a theme that in the general run of obscurantists is not looked upon with favor. I helped found and worked for years and did everything I could for the success of a magazine in Chicago, Poetry, founded by Harriett Monroe, and I feel melancholy about turning through its pages to see how seldom occupied it is with the theme Harriet Monroe included.[47]

The New Critics tend to include Sandburg and Whitman in the same category, referring to them as "the Whitman-Sandburg tradition," as in William Van O'Connor's Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry,[48] but at any rate,

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[47]Sandburg, quoted from Golden's Carl Sandburg, pp. 175-6; the source is unknown.

[48]William V. O'Connor, Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry (Chicago, 1948), pp. 7-30.

much more detailed study must be done to examine the relationship of the two poets.

With regard to the search for the folk tradition, Mark Twain can be considered Sandburg's predecessor, but there is no record of what Sandburg thought of him, although his biographer, Harry Golden, says, "I believe that in many respects he is much closer to Mark Twain than to Walt Whitman. . . . Twain celebrated the vigor of a rural America rushing to close the frontier and Sandburg embodies the last of the Lincoln ideas."[49]

For Sandburg the greatest embodiment of American tradition was Abraham Lincoln, a typical and authentic American legendary hero. Early in his career, he started collecting materials about Lincoln, which are said to have overflowed from his boxes and bookcases when his third book, Smoke and Steel, appeared in 1920.[50]

A short poem, "Fire-Logs," in Cornhuskers implies Sandburg's admiration of Lincoln, along with his nostalgic feeling for legendary days:

> Nancy Hanks dreams by the fire;
> Dreams, and the logs sputter,

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[49]Golden, op. cit., pp. 28-9.

[50]Detzer, op. cit., pp. 128.

And the yellow tongues climb.
Red lines lick their way in flickers.
Oh, sputter, logs.
Oh, dream, Nancy.
Time now for a beautiful child.
Time now for a tall man to come.[51]

Lincoln's homeland was also Sandburg's homeland, and he probably felt some sense of identification with Lincoln. For instance, such a passage as the following, dealing with Lincoln, reflects also Sandburg's memories of the great dreams in his hobo days:

> . . . plowing, hoeing, cutting and shucking, again his bare feet spoke with the clay of the earth. . . . Abraham Lincoln, twenty-two years old, floated a canoe down the Sangamon River . . . laughter and youth in his bones, in his heart a few pennies of dreams, in his head a ragbag of thoughts he could never expect to sell. . . .[52]

But it is a mistake to emphasize the romantic aspect of his love of Lincoln; he knew better than anyone else that twentieth-century America was far away from Lincoln's tradition, as shown in the fatalism of "Cool Tombs." When in 1920 Louis Untermeyer asked him to write Lincoln poetry in his attempt to compile an anthology of new American poetry, Sandburg said:

> I am to write a trilogy about Lincoln some day, to break down all this sentimentalizing about him. It's curious the company Lincoln keeps these days.

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[51] Sandburg, Complete Poems, p. 102.

[52] Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years (New York, 1926), p. 132.

> I find his picture on the walls of politicians and big business men who do not understand him and probably would not approve of him if they did.[53]

In the earlier decades of the twentieth century, there still lived many people who remembered Lincoln and the Republican convention vividly. Every time Sandburg found such men, he listened to their talks and took notes with enthusiasm.[54]

When his Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years was published in 1927, many critics and reviewers, who had ignored his peotry for a long time, praised him with a surprisingly warm enthusiasm; the biography received the highest appluase Sandburg had ever had from about forty periodicals, including the Times Literary Supplement. The words of The Independent were typical of all the book reviews: "These two volumes of biography make up the best, and noblest poem that Carl Sandburg has yet written."[55] Thus the fame of Sandburg the biographer surpassed that of Sandburg the poet. Later he himself confessed:

> At fifty I had published a two-volume biography and The American Songbag, and there was puzzlement as to whether I was a poet, a biographer, a wandering

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[53,54] Detzer, op. cit., p. 138.

[55] D. R., "The Epic of Lincoln," The Independent, LXVI (February 13, 1926), p. 193.

> troubadour with a guitar, a midwest Hans Christian Anderson, or a historian of current events. . . .[56]

Therefore, The People, Yes, which appeared in 1936, seven years after the publication of Good Morning, America, was in a sense the reflection of that puzzlement, as well as of the final consequence of the change which had been underlying his poetic expression since the days of Cornhuskers. Judging from The People, Yes, Sandburg's American tradition never nourished his poetic gift, which showed some possibilities of flowing in his earlier days. It was therefore quite unfortunate that it was in the "tumult" of the folk tradition that Sandburg had to search for his poetic vision, but at the same time, it was a natural result of his refusal of the literary tradition.

His idea of the literary tradition is shown in the following data. In the years following the publication of Chicago Poems, according to Harry Golden, Sandburg used to say: "Here is the difference between Dante, Milton, and me. They wrote about hell and never saw the place. I wrote about Chicago after looking the town over for years and years."[57] Later he offered an ironical tribute to the ghost of John Milton:

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[56]Sandburg, Complete Poems, p. xxix.

[57]Golden, op. cit., p. 152.

If I then lost my eyes and the world was all
dark and I sat with only memories and talk--. . .
I would sit by the fire and dream of hell
and heaven,
Idiots and kings, women my eyes could never
look on again,
And God Himself and the rebels God threw
into hell.[58]

With regard to Sandburg's refusal of the literary tradition, Cleanth Brooks, a spokesman of the New Critics, sharply gets to the point in his Modern Poetry and the Tradition. Calling Lindsay, Masters, and Sandburg "poets of revolt," who praised "American scenes, American things, and the American people," he severely denounces the superficiality of their poetry:

> [T]he English Tradition included much more than the nineteenth century. The tendency to identify the tradition with Victorianism is in itself a vivid testimony to the thinness of the tradition in America. . . . The result of the revolt of Sandburg and others was probably healthy. At the same time, one must now see more and more clearly that much of the poetry of this revolt was negative in effect; and one must realize that a number of poets were then hailed as geniuses, not so much for what they wrote as for what they refused to write. . . .[59]

Eventually, Brooks goes on to say, the revolt against the dead conventions of Victorianism merely resulted in confining them to American materials "on the surface at

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[58]Sandburg, "To the Ghost of John Milton," Complete Poems, pp. 184-5.

[59]Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill, 1936), pp. 69-109.

least." Brooks's standpoint is that any kind of new poetry should be deeply rooted in some traditional elements, as the poets of the Romantic revolt found them in "the romantic Shakespeare and the folk ballad," and as Eliot, Tate, Ransom, and Warren, whose achievement Brooks calls "the third revolution in poetry," found them in the metaphysical poets. "Sandburg," he concludes, "in rejecting Keats and Tennyson, cut himself off from the English tradition altogether."

What did Sandburg get as a reward by refusing the past as "a bucket of ashes"? As analyzed in the first section of this chapter, "Prairie" and "Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind" are marked by a lack of the vision of the future and a sensuous invocation to Nature. In other words, Sandburg's concept of time, as Brooks points out, is that of "timeless present." Here is his basic attitude to life--a sensuous and momentary reaction to it--which underwent no essential change since the days of Chicago Poems. It was also firmly connected with his agnosticism.

Sandburg looked for some compensation in the folk tradition of America as a result of his refusal of the past, but he could not find a concentrated focus for his poetry. On the contrary, he wasted and dispersed his poetic faculty

in the vast reality of the tumultuous folk tradition. This is partly because he came at a time when America was becoming industrialized and therefore the tradition itself was undergoing a change from a rural to an urban environment. Lindsay's tragedy was to be a great warning for Sandburg. What one would wish for Sandburg is that he could have found a new cultural perspective on America, which has been attempting to build a homogeneous civilization on the basis of the time-honored European tradition.

Even though this is true, Brooks's criticism of Sandburg, in spite of his deep insight into this defect, cannot be free from the charge that Brooks himself turned his back on the reality of America and confined himself to the old tradition of the Metaphysical poets. The New Criticism was the expression of an aesthetic experimentalism which stood at the opposite pole from the poets of "revolt" and Americanism. Herein also lies the reflection of the division of the American poetic scene.

This presents a significant subject for a study of American literature in that one can find a close parallel to it in the last century--the difference between Whitman and Poe. Like Sandburg, Whitman sought a distinctly American tradition, while Poe, like Eliot and his followers, was concerned to relate himself to the European tradition.

This divergence is basic to the nature of American civilization.

D. The People, Yes or No?

For several years since the publication of Good Morning, America, Sandburg had devoted himself to writing a children's story, a biography of his brother-in-law, and a continuation of Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years. Then in 1936 there appeared his last book of poetry, The People, Yes, which was marked by a huge accumulation of legends, tall tales, wise and foolish sayings, folk proverbs, and superstitions. His aim was a pursuit of the American folk tradition; above all, the Lincoln materials were fully used as the core of the poem.

The decade of the nineteen-thirties, which was marked by the rising proletarian movement and the vogue of American folklore, brought Sandburg's reputation to the highest point of his long career. Many expatriates came back to their native land; as typically expressed by Malcolm Cowley: "The exiles returned!" It may be said that their sense of revulsion against Fascism made them awaken to the democratic tradition of America; for example, a warm patriotism and the spirit of democracy run through Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls. And Macleish sang:

America is promises to
Take!
America is promises to
Us,
To take them
Brutally
With love . . .[60]

And at the same time, an interest in the authentic American folk tradition swept over the country, and a number of books on folklore, history, and biographies of heroes were published and welcomed by the people.

Here one must not overlook the fact that, in spite of the Marxist storms in America, as well as in the outside world, Sandburg's earlier socialistic ideas completely vanished from the new volume of verse. The People, Yes was not only a reflection of the sweeping Americanism and the vogue for folk tradition, but also the climax of Sandburg's pursuit of the American tradition.

Later Sandburg said, "Affirmative of swarming and brawling Democracy, it [The People, Yes] attempts to give back to the people their own lingo."[61] And amid the international crisis, during the war days, he emphasized the importance of discipline in democracy through a broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera House:

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[60]Archibald MacLeish, "America was Promises," Collected Poems, 1917-1952 (Boston, 1952), p. 341.

[61]Sandburg, Complete Poems, p. xxiii.

> To the free man and the man disciplined in a democracy, there is always faith in people. I doubt whether any man can have health or even a little fun out of his democracy unless he has some deep-rooted faith in the people, a love of the people such as Abraham Lincoln had, loving and understanding them with all their faults and failings. In one passage of my sixth book of poetry, The People, Yes, I put a lot of proverbs made by people. One way or another these proverbs have the breath of the people--the people who have made our country what it is.[62]

The long poem, which consists of 107 sections, begins with the images of "the people of the earth," "the family of man" who came "[f]rom the four corners of the earth" and from places where "fog is born with mist children." They "marched and traveled / To gather on a great plain."[63] Sandburg defines this poem as follows:

> This is the tale of the Howdeehow powpow,
> One of a thousand drolls the people tell of themselves,
> Of tall corn, of wide rivers, of big snakes,
> Of giants and dwarfs, heroes and clowns,
> Grown in the soil of the mass of people. . . .[64]

Thus a number of folk heroes appear on the stage: Monte Cristo, Mildred Klinghopper, Andy Adams, Paul Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, Pecos Pete, John Henry, Rip Van Winkle, Mother Carey, Mike Fink, Johnny Appleseed, and so forth;

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[62]Sandburg, "A Picture of the American People," Home Front Memo (New York, 1943), pp. 30-3.

[63]Sandburg, Complete Poems, Sections 1 and 2, pp. 439-40.

[64]Ibid., Section 2, p. 441.

and in addition a great many plain people tell tall stories, yarns, and proverbs:

> "How are crops this year?"
> "Not so good for a good year
> but not so bad for a bad year."[65]

> "Did you hear about the empty barrel of flour?"
> "No." "Nothing in it."[66]

> ". . . a fog so thick we shingled the barn and six feet out on the fog."
> ". . . the boy who climbed a cornstalk growing so fast he would have starved to death if they hadn't shot biscuits up to him . . ."[67]

Mike Fink, "half wild horse and half cock-eyed alligator," roars:

> "I can out-run, out-jump, outshoot, out-bag, out-drink . . . any man on both sides of the river . . . My trigger finger itches and I want to go red hot. War, famine, and bloodshed put flesh on my bones, and hardship's my daily bread."[68]

The People, Yes is also a treasure-house of folk wisdom, superstitions, beliefs, and old sayings:

> Polite words open iron gates.
> Be polite but not too polite.[69]

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[65] Ibid., Section 48, p. 500.

[66] Ibid., Section 47, p. 496.

[67] Ibid., Section 45, p. 491.

[68] Ibid., Section 45, p. 495.

[69] Ibid., Section 49, p. 504.

> If your right foot itches you will soon start on
> a journey, if it's your left foot you will go
> where you are not wanted.[70]

This poem is, as it were, a huge document of the blood, sweat, and wisdom which had been inherited from the American pioneers. What does Sandburg intend to do through this tremendous presentation? It is, needless to say, a pursuit of the image of the people. What are the people? This question runs throughout the huge 107-page poem. His pictures of the people are rich in variety and color, like his tentative definitions of poetry. What he attempts to do here is to show how the people are, their wisdom and strength even along with their dark and foolish sides, as candidly as possible; in other words, he is affirmative of their chaos and turmoil. The following is his most brilliant image of the people:

> The people, yes--
> Born with bones and heart fused in deep and
> violent secrets
> Mixed from a bowl of sky blue dreams and sea
> slime facts--
> A seething of saints and sinners, toilers,
> loafers, oxen, apes
> In a womb of superstitution, faith, genius,
> crime, sacrifice--
> The one and only source of armies, navies,
> work gangs,
> The living flowing breath of the History of
> nations,

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[70] Ibid., Section 53, p. 514.

Of the little Family of Man hugging the little
ball of Earth,
And a long hall of mirrors, straight, convex
and concave,
Moving and endless with scrolls of the living,
Shimmering with phantoms flung from the past,
Shot over with lights of babies to come, not
yet here.[71]

Sandburg keeps his humanitarian eyes on the people, who are sly, ignorant, immoral, stupid, and tragic, but at the same time, honest, wise, moral, smart, and comic. This contradictory nature of the people, is what strikes Sandburg more than anything else:

The people is a polychrome,
a spectrum and a prism
held in a moving monolith,
a console organ of changing themes . . .[72]

Sandburg asks over again: "What is the people?"

The people is Everyman, everybody.
Everybody is you and me and all others . . .[73]

. . . Who knows the people?
. . . The People, yes. . . .[74]

The people is a lighted believer and
hoper--and this is to be held against
them?[75]

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[71] Ibid., Section 29, pp. 470-71.

[72] Ibid., Section 107, pp. 616-7.

[73] Ibid., Section 13, p. 453.

[74] Ibid., Section 21, p. 462.

[75] Ibid., Section 22, p. 462.

For Sandburg the people is "a builder, a wrecker, a builder again, / a juggler of shifting puppets . . ."[76] and "a long shadow / trembling around the earth . . ."[77] He attempts to find humanity in the tumult and disorder, although he says, "the people is pandora's box, humpty dumpty." Thus "the people is the grand canyon of humanity / and many many miles across."[78]

Despite his intended affirmation of the people's strength and wisdom, however, his focus is blurred and confused amid the abundant phrases, stories, old sayings, and other folk materials. What hope does he present to the people? What is his vision of the future? He says:

> Hope is a tattered flag and a dream out of time.
> Hope is a heartspun word, the rainbow, the
> shadow in white, . . .
> Hope is an echo, hope ties itself yonder,
> yonder . . .[79]

Although yesterday is gone and "a nickel thrown on a Salvation Army drum," "tomorrow may never come, / today is here."[80] Here is still Sandburg's inherent agnostic attitude. He says, "The People, Yes!" but he cannot help adding,

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[76] Ibid., Section 87, p. 577.

[77] Ibid., Section 91, p. 589.

[78] Ibid., Section 97, p. 596.

[79] Ibid., Section 16, p. 455.

[80] Ibid., Section 50, p. 507.

Out of what is their change
from chaos to order
and chaos again?[81]

Here one cannot find such a bitter hostility to injustice as in "Chicago," written twenty years previously. He often avoids direct statement. Of course, however, in spite of such a dubious attitude, he shows some confidence:

Who can fight against the future?
What is the decree of tomorrow?
Haven't the people gone on and on
always taking more of their own?
How can the orders of the day
be against the people in this time?
What can stop them from taking
more and more of their own?[82]

Thus the U. S. A. is the great hope for him: "Some day when the United States of the Earth / gets going and runs smooth and pretty there / will be more of him than we have now."[83] And Sandburg's support of Roosevelt's New Deal is suggested at the last part of the poem; some say planned economy is tyranny, but what do they know about it?

Planned economy will arrive, stand up,
and stay a long time . . .
Tomorrow the people say Yes or No by one question:
"What else can be done?"[84]

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[81] Ibid., Section 58, p. 525.

[82] Ibid., Section 71, p. 555.

[83] Ibid., Section 87, p. 578.

[84] Ibid., Section 105, p. 614.

But there is no reasonable statement why he is for the New Deal; the only answer that one can find here is one of the people's old sayings, "What else can be done?" It seems that this care-free attitude of the people is the only conclusion that Sandburg has gotten from his piles of folk materials. Finally, the people, as Sandburg believes, might be able to save themselves; "The people know hope," he continues, "the people know the salt of the sea / and the strength of the winds / lashing the corners of the earth."[85] Hence his conclusion, "[W]ho can live without the hope?" But one cannot help asking back, "What is the hope?" His answer dissolves itself into a vague idea of the people. The last refrain of his huge poem, which also appears on the first page, is suggestive of the ambiguity of his poetic focus and idea:

> In the darkness with a great bundle of grief
> the people march.
> In the night, and overhead a shovel of stars for
> keeps, the people march:
> "Where to? What next?"[86]

This refrain is probably intended to suggest the people's strength, but it results in a lack of intensity in the poem as a whole. It is the last four words that many critics blamed severely. William Van O'Connor

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[85] Ibid., Section 107, pp. 616-7.

[86] Ibid., Section 107, pp. 616-7.

points out that "the pathetic questions" of the refrain express Sandburg's indecision.[87] M. D. Zabel, with all his praise of the poem as "a testament" to the American people, criticizes Sandburg's uncertainty about human salvation.[88]

After all, the conclusion is that The People, Yes is marked by Sandburg's vague image of the people and his lack of a vision of the future in spite of his efforts to find it. Thus his search for folk tradition resulted only in his discovery of the "shadows" or "silhouettes" of the people.

Sandburg's people are, as it were, gregarious animals who lack individuality. In Section 17 he quotes a denial of the people--"The people is a myth, an abstraction"--and refutes it by asking, ". . . what myth would you put in place / of the people? / . . . what abstraction would you exchange / for this one?" Yet it was a myth and an abstraction that he himself put in place.[89] His myth and abstraction of the people are the very reflection of his invocation to, and worship of, the

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[87]William V. O'Connor, op. cit., p. 26.

[88]M. D. Zabel, "Sandburg's testament," Poetry, XXXXIX (October, 1936), pp. 33-45.

[89]Sandburg, Ibid., Section 17, p. 456.

physical and mechanical strength and energy of the people. By looking over Chicago Poems, one knows that Sandburg the poet, despite his search for folk tradition and the change of his theme and tone, has rarely showed any essential development in his basic poetic representation. On the contrary, his search for folklore only resulted in the vagueness and disunity of his focus; for example, his image of Lincoln overlaps his own ideal and faceless figures of the people: his Lincoln "was a mystery in smoke and flags . . ."; Lincoln was a poet and a historian; he gathered "the feel of the American dream / and saw its kindred over the earth."[90]

Later when his Complete Poems was published in 1950 his idea of poetry was still full of ambiguity and dubiousness. His "Notes for a Preface" is, as it were, the final balance sheet of his career.[91] The notes begin with the citation of the several examples which show "What can be explained is not poetry" or art; Babe Ruth, a home-run king, said, "[A]ll I can tell 'em is I pick a good one and sock it"; John Steinbeck said regarding his Of Mice and Men, "I began with an equation and after that

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[90] Ibid., Section 57, p. 521-4.

[91] Ibid., "Notes for a Preface," pp. xxi-xxix.

the story wrote itself." Sandburg's view of artistic creation seems to be right so far, but this is only the prologue to his essay on poetry, which is developed, to begin with, by his high praise of the poets of "Streets and struggles, of dust and combat, of violence wanton or justified," of plain folk living close to a hard earth--for example, John M. Synge and Stephen Vincent Benét--and then, by his attack on "a formal poetry perfect only in form, 'all dressed up and nowhere to go,'" a poetry only "with the skill of a solved crossword puzzle." And he criticizes Oliver Wendell Holmes's idea of rhythm and rhyme that "Rhythm alone is a tether . . . rhythms are iron fetters. . . ." and states ironically:

> A proficient and sometimes exquisite performer in rhymed verse goes out of his way to register the point that the more rhyme there is in poetry the more danger of its tricking the writer into something other than the urge in the beginning. . . .

Hence his unique classification of poetry, as quoted earlier; and Oliver Cromwell's, Michelangelo's, Olive Schreiner's, and Justice Holmes' words in their speeches or books are cited as the best examples of "the cadence utterance of passion."

This statement might be essentially to the point, but it seems that he tries to defend the looseness of his own poetic expression and his lack of a theoretical foundation. The following words indicate this point more clearly:

> What is instinct? What is thought? Where is the absolute line between these two? Nobody knows--as yet. What is an Emotion as apart from an Idea? When are Concept and Feeling identical? Nobody knows--exactly--as yet. What is an ideational state of mind as set off from a reverie? When do the foregoing seemingly contrasted urges of blood and brain move into a confluence with an end result of Creative Art? . . . What is this borderland of dream and logic, of fantasy and reason . . .? There are those who believe they know--and those who hope they may yet know. . . .

Here is no desire for theory; in this sense, too, he stands at the extreme opposite side, at a great distance, from the modern aesthetic poets, including the metaphysical poets and the New Critics. One can say that Sandburg's image of a poet exactly fits that of a gargoyle; for him poetry is a gargoyle spout:

> . . . It gargoyle was a child's dream of a mouth. . . . And I was the more the fist pounded the more the mouth laughed, the fist is pounding and pounding, and the mouth answering. . . .[92]

> All I can give you is broken-face gargoyle.
> All I can give you now is a double gorilla head with two fish mouths and four eagle eyes hooked on a street wall, spouting water and looking two ways to the ends of the street . . .[93]

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[92] Ibid., "Gargoyle," p. 137.

[93] Ibid., "Broken-face Gargoyle," pp. 175-6.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In Chapter II, an attempt was made to illuminate Sandburg's modernist quality--impressionism--in his Chicago Poems, which is in general considered to be mere bombastic, tradition-shattering poetry, and for that purpose, a somewhat detailed analysis of his poetic imagery has been added. What Sandburg intended to do in his first volume was to present his sensuous response to the new American civilization rising rapidly due to developing industry and the power of the melting pot, through his imagistic pictures of vivid color. He also showed that there was the sparkling fire of poetry even in the slag of industrialism and the materialistic chaos of American society in those days, from which a number of expatriates escaped.

In thought he was essentially an agnostic naturalist, and in technique an imagistic impressionist. Whether consciously or not, he had some affinity with the Imagists in the earlier twentiety-century. And his good poems, which are short, tender lyrics, were produced in these early days.

Unfortunately, however, he had no thought powerful enough to unify his various, brilliant images.

His early socialistic ideas, simple and spontaneous, were absorbed into the broader scope of pessimistic skepticism. And later, in his attempt to overcome pessimism and find some foundation for poetic expression, he had obviously indicated his intention, in search of an American folk tradition, to be an epic voice of "America singing." The folk tradition represented by Lincoln, the legendary embodiment of the American democratic spirit, presented a new poetic ground for Sandburg, who refused and revolted against the Genteel Tradition.

But the search for the folk spirit, despite his national fame as Lincoln's greatest biographer, resulted in serious misfortune to the Sandburg the poet. His lack of theory, which had already been seen in Chicago Poems, was not redeemed by his imagery and his use of the American folk tradition. On the contrary, his poetic expression lost its focus amid the chaos and tumult of the folk world. Besides that, it seems that he accepted and loved the turmoil, instead of trying to find some unifying principle for his poetry in it, when he said:

> Walk again where the mass human shadows foregather,
> silhouettes and pantomimes of the great
> human procession wind with a crying out loud,
> and rotten laughters mix with raging
> tumults . . .[1]

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[1]Sandburg, Complete Poems, "Good Morning, America," p. 334.

Unfortunately, moreover, his ideal--Lincoln's spirit--had long been obscured by the highly materialistic nature of the American civilization, as he himself admitted. After all, from the folk materials he could not discover a clear poetic vision of the future fitting an expression of changing America in his days. The most outstanding trait of American folklore lies in its heterogeneity, as Sandburg himself recognized. This created a problem for Sandburg because he was searching for a single tradition in what was essentially a multiplicity of traditions. In addition to this, much of American folklore came over the ocean with the pioneers and thus is essentially European rather than authentically American. A third difficulty was that what is really indigenous in the American folk tradition is a product of the frontier, and the frontier was passing from existence as Sandburg began to write.

The world expressed in Chicago Poems was also that of heterogeneity in the huge melting pot. Therefore, it follows, in a sense, that his later folklorism--his search for folk tradition--was the natural and essential development of his early impressionism, which reflects his sensuous reaction to the newly-rising, tumultuous American civilization. The Chicago poet, who was born and bred in the center of the huge melting pot as a son of an immigrant,

was unable to get away from the chaos not only as a new poet of the Midwestern revolt, but also as a poet of the American folk tradition. It was an ironical result for him who refused the past as "a bucket of ashes." His main fault lies in his "patriotic" insistence upon so-called Americanism separated from the historical tradition of European civilization.

For this reason, when the chaos of the melting pot and new industry achieved its homogeneity to a greater extent through "First World War, the gay postwar prosperity years, the Great Depression, the second World War, peace and the Cold War, global drama on a colossal scale,"[2] Sandburg's poetry was destined to be far from the people's sentiments. Hence the postwar eclipse of his fame. Sandburg himself says, ". . . what we find gay and full of nourishment at one time, we may find later has lost interest for us . . . Why this is so we do not know. . . ."[3]

Can it be said, then, that Sandburg's decline indicates that he dug only the surface of American soil; in other words, his poetic world is the picture of an America of the past which is not worth looking back over

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[2] Ibid., "Notes for a Preface," p. xxiii.

[3] Ibid., p. xxviii.

again? Indeed America has come out of the old chaos to a greater degree, but no one can neglect Sandburg's efforts to make his poetry close to the American people and land. He makes a sharp contrast to some expatriates who escaped from the reality of America, which they called a barren land for artistic creation. Thus one can conclude that some of his early poems will endure as the fresh expression of young America.

America will have to find its own ideal image, as Sandburg has done. Viewed in this light, Sandburg's Americanism, although it did not give a big success to his poetry, embodies a significant turning point in American literary history, in contrast with T. S. Eliot's achievement. His later works, especially The People, Yes, will remain a cultural monument for what he could not achieve rather than for what he did.

America is and always will be, as it has been, a seeker and a finder. In this sense, it might be suggestive of the future to close this thesis by quoting one of Sandburg's last poems:

Ever a Seeker

The fingers turn the pages
The pages unfold as a scroll.
There was the time there was no America.
Then came on the scroll an earthly
    America, a land of beginning,
    an America being born

Then came a later America, seeker
and finder, yet ever more seeker
than finder, ever seeking its way
amid storm and dream.[4]

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[4]New York Times Magazine (January 5, 1958), p. 14.

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